

WorldFish "Knowledge Sharing: Room for Improvement?" survey

Analysis of results and recommendations

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Survey methodology

This 8-page document is intended to serve as a knowledge audit for WorldFish in its Knowledge Management (KM) strategy development process. The "Knowledge Sharing: Room for Improvement?" survey was developed by this consultant and Helen Leitch and her team. The 27 questions were meant to identify what kind of knowledge exists and where it resides in WorldFish, as well as to see if there are gaps between what staff know and what they need to know. The survey was open to staff from December 3 to 21, 2008; a total of 97 staff members provided responses during this period.

In order to break down the "Knowledge Sharing: Room for Improvement?" survey, a SWOT-type of analysis was used. In a typical SWOT, the internal **S**trengths and **W**eaknesses of an organization are analyzed, as well as the **O**pportunities and **T**hreats revealed by the data gathered on the external environment. In this case however, the opportunities and threats are mostly internal to WorldFish.

Who replied?

A majority of respondents are either Scientists/researcher or Research support staff who have many years of professional experience (35% have more than 15 years) but most of whom have only been at World Fish between 1 and 5 years. They are spread amongst disciplines but Natural Resource Management, Policy/Economics and Social Science and Corporate Services are the best represented. Half of the respondents come from Headquarters.

Key findings: SWOT

Strengths

Overall, the respondents feel very positive towards KM. They consider themselves to be knowledge workers and that they know the difference between knowledge and information, both definite advantages when trying to consolidate KM within an organization. Also, a high percentage of staff overall believe that they do not repeat tasks unnecessarily, and can find the information they need to do their work. This is well reflected by the fact that a majority of respondents spend 30 minutes to two hour per day looking for information/ knowledge, which is not an excessive amount of time.

The understanding of the benefits of information/knowledge sharing (IS/KS) - question 8 - within WorldFish is also very high overall, especially regarding the appreciation of opportunities of IS/KS to learn from each other's expertise, providing better services to partners and minimizing duplication of effort, all of these especially at the Scientists and Senior Management levels. The latter are definitely the two most positive levels when it comes to understanding the benefits of IS/KS.

Other important strengths for WorldFish is that (overall) staff think that sharing knowledge is a natural part of the work, that Knowledge sharing is explicitly featured in job descriptions and that there is encouragement for knowledge exchange by supervisors. Also, respondents overwhelmingly do not feel that their information is too sensitive, useless or that sharing it is dangerous for their jobs. Therefore, there exists rather good conditions overall for IS/KS at WorldFish.

Weaknesses

While overall conditions seem favorable, the survey points to a few weaknesses in the system that were highlighted by all respondents. It also points to a some concrete liabilities according to specific positions in the organization. The less positive aspects of the survey help to draw a rough portrait of the different levels and their often different preoccupations regarding knowledge.

All staff felt that WorldFish is vulnerable to losing its experience when individuals leave the organization. For most respondent, but especially Scientists and Regional Directors/DD, information does not appear to flow freely throughout WorldFish, crossing teams, groups and regional offices, and there is no clearly defined corporate vision, strategy and guidelines for KM/KS. Regional Directors/DD in particular are the most critical of KM overall. Interestingly, half of them feel that that they repeat tasks unnecessarily and cannot find the information they need to do their work. They also do not feel that tools and IT systems currently available help to facilitate knowledge sharing.

Most respondents do not feel they can take time out to reflect on their work experience and learn lessons from it, nor that Project reports are routinely analyzed to identify what has been learned from the work and what lessons could be applied in the future. Scientists and Project leaders/PC are systematically most critical of anything related to how WorldFish learns as an organization, as well as how it uses its learning to influence the policy and practice of other organizations. Scientists also strongly feel there is no systematic database of all the project work which can enable staff and 'outsiders' to identify where expertise resides. They also particularly disagree about the existence of clear incentives for KS and that sharing of experience and ideas amongst peers within WorldFish is given a high priority.

Research support staff tend less to feel they know the difference between knowledge and information, feel less encouragement from their supervisors for KS than other staff and also feel less strongly that sharing knowledge is a natural part of their work and explicitly featured in their job description. Whether this is because their job tends to have an administrative focus is unclear but there is definitely a need to address this discrepancy.

Regional Directors/DD and Senior Management are the most skeptical that WorldFish changes its practices and priorities to reflect new knowledge and insights in its efforts to constantly improve its effectiveness. Most interestingly, these two levels of management (along with Research support staff) see WorldFish as having an organizational culture that facilitates learning from mistakes. Scientists and Project leaders/PC completely disagree on this last point. Therefore, there appears to be a very clear line drawn between the needs of those dealing working on a more administrative or management side, with those working doing the actual science or research work.

Opportunities

Generally speaking there are excellent opportunities that present themselves at WorldFish. At the Regional Directors/DD and Senior management levels, they tend to see more overall benefits of information/knowledge sharing towards being more

creative and innovative than the rest of the staff. This is something that can be leveraged in the development of the KM strategy.

Scientists, Senior Management and new staff (those who have worked at WorldFish less than one year) are especially positive about KM. Newer staff are systematically more critical of the current state of KS at WorldFish but also feel that KS is really important in their work. These people are the KM champions and they should be engaged as much as possible in the development of a strategy.

The KM strategy should seek to address what WorldFish staff think is important, which are listed below, in Box 1.

Box 1: Top 10 things that WorldFish staff feel is important in their work (in order of overall importance):

1. That information flows freely throughout WorldFish, crossing teams, groups and regional offices without hindrance
2. Encouragement for knowledge exchange from supervisors
3. That KS is an important part of the work
4. That WorldFish has a systematic database of all its project work which can enable staff and 'outsiders' to identify where expertise resides
5. That WorldFish offers clear incentives for sharing knowledge
6. That WorldFish has an organizational culture that facilitates learning from mistakes
7. That WorldFish systematically uses its learning to improve its own practice and influence the policy and practice of other organizations
8. That WorldFish changes its practices and priorities to reflect new knowledge and insights in its efforts to constantly improve its effectiveness
9. That project reports be routinely analyzed to identify what has been learned from the work and what lessons could be applied in the future
10. That WorldFish is not vulnerable to losing its experience when individuals leave

Learning opportunities

An overwhelming 97 % of staff would welcome more opportunities to learn from others (the 3% who don't are either Research support staff or Senior management).

WorldFish staff learn in a variety of ways but the three top means are people-oriented, namely through field visits, exchanges with people from partner organizations, and informal contacts. Only after this does analyzing reports and documents and studying literature come into play, the latter more at the Scientists and Regional Director/DD levels. Working groups on specific topics are also very important learning spaces for Scientists, trainings for Research support staff, and internal brainstorming sessions for Project leaders/PC and Regional Directors/DD. So there would definitely be scope to further support and encourage this type of people-focused learning opportunities.

It is interesting to note that the Team meetings were not considered to be very strong learning events by any level of respondents. Coffee breaks or lunch breaks, while

being informal types of contacts, do not appear to be hugely important as learning venues as well.

When asked about meetings where significant experiences exchanges occur, half of the respondents said they attended such meetings. But those numbers though vary greatly according to their position; half of both Project leaders/PC and Research support staff are not aware that such meetings occur. It would be interesting to further delve into why this discrepancy exists.

Furthermore, a majority of staff get regularly asked for advice and experience, mostly on a private/informal basis, but Research support staff feel they rarely get consulted and would have more to share. There is also definitely a recurring theme in the Research support staff comments, which has something to do with access, either to meetings of interest, or to online materials (see Box 3).

Overall, staff highlighted the top knowledge sharing initiatives (Box 2) as those that should serve as models and be acknowledged within the organization.

Box 2: Top 5 models for knowledge sharing within WF

1. Food for Thought seminar
2. GeoCoP
3. Online discussion /sharing through e-mail/internet groups, around certain themes
4. WorldFish Resilience Forum
5. (each below at number 5)
 - Business Development and communications
 - Action research, which helps to strengthen relationships with other similar organizations
 - Project running under the ICT-KM program, Knowledge Sharing in Research is pilot testing approaches for KS in Research
 - Colleagues brought together for proposal development
 - Discipline updates in regular meetings

The following suggestions were also offered for improving knowledge sharing initiatives or experiences:

Box 3: Suggestions for KS opportunities

- Annual workshop/seminar covering all research projects/activities of the organization by bringing researchers in one place and the event should rotate across regions
- Important and interesting meetings in the center should be open for all researchers
- Online materials without restricted access
- Attendance of Senior management would be important during Food for Thought seminars
- Cross-regional knowledge sharing on dealing with different donors, donor contracts and guidelines would be useful
- More pooling of lessons and experiences

There are definitely many existing KS or learning initiatives within WorldFish and a KM strategy should seek to support what is already there. At the time, it will have to look at what is needed and leverage the opportunities that present themselves, especially the people-oriented ones.

Resources opportunities

The best rated resources overall were the WorldFish Website, the Monthly staff newsletter, the Fishnet and the Publication database but the resources below were identified as most important in the work of WorldFish staff:

Box 4: Top 5 most important resources for staff

1. Fishnet
2. WorldFish Projects database
3. WorldFish Website
4. Publication database
5. Regular all staff meetings

The Intranet, Website and publication database seem to satisfy staff's needs but the results show that there is an opportunity to improve the Projects database and the regular all staff meetings. The current usefulness of the latter is split almost evenly among each of the levels, except for Project leaders, who seem to find them most helpful. As for the Projects database, Researchers and Senior management consider the current tool much more useful than the other levels, who rated it poorly. Many of the final comments mentioned the need for the Project database to be much more than what it is (i.e. a dynamic platform to find out about current projects, pipeline projects, lessons learned, best practice, etc.).

It is interesting to note that few people seemed to know anything about either online thematic networks, or face-to-face thematic briefings by colleagues. Both of these are usually considered high impact knowledge sharing activities. A few people deplored the lack of such thematic forums in their final comments. Interestingly enough, face-to-face and email are considered the top 2 sharing channels, with Research journal publications coming in third.

In terms of which resources staff consult for information mainly outside of WorldFish, Box 5 contains the top rated sites.

Box 5: Top 10 consulted websites

1. WorldFish website
2. Google
3. Fishnet
4. FAO websites and databases
5. Wikipedia
6. SciDev
7. CGIAR website
8. IFPRI website
9. BBC
10. FishBase

Networking opportunities

WorldFish staff already contact many different organizations, including these top 5:

- 1.FAO
- 2.IWMI
- 3.IRRI
- 4.WWF
- 5.USAID and IFAD (ex-aequo)

But staff comments and recommendations pointed to the need for more inter-discipline and inter-regional knowledge exchanges and more cross-CGIAR centre networking in the future.

Regarding the question which asked staff to name three people within WorldFish they contacted most often, we will be using social networking software to map out the results and look at the pathways of influence within the organization. This mapping will be done at the end of January.

Threats

There are a few threats that have to be acknowledged and addressed within the KM strategy development process. Regional Directors/DD and Senior Management do not see KS as explicitly featured in their job description and seemingly would leave it for others to do. The latter is the only level that feels that WorldFish is not vulnerable to losing its experience when individuals leave, something that has been flagged as important by every other levels. Project leaders/PC see themselves less as knowledge workers. Scientists see the potential for KS but do not feel it is a high priority for the organization and say that there are no clear incentives to do so. Research staff understand KM less than others and tend to feel left out.

It is also interesting to see how the different levels also relate to one another in the challenges they face (Box 6). They challenges should all be considered as threats and tackled directly.

Box 6: Top 5 sharing challenges

1. No proper organizational guidelines on sharing (all across the board)
2. Do not know about other person's knowledge needs (Scientists and Project leaders/PC in particular)
3. Lack of open-minded sharing environment (Scientists and Research staff in particular)
4. Don't perceive there is an urgent need to share (Research staff and Senior management)
5. No proper IT platform to share (Research staff, Regional Directors/DD and Senior management)

Whose Knowledge blockages?

One of the most striking survey result is that people don't agree about the blockages to KS **within** their own position levels. For all of the other questions, there is mostly tacit agreement within each level. For the 3 overall biggest perceived blockages, an

almost equal number (or more) of people disagree:

- Time issues: in all of the levels there is roughly a half-half split on whether time is a constraint, except for Regional Directors/DD, who most definitely think that there are time issues
- Hierarchical work flows or strict regulations: here also, in all of the levels there is an almost a half-half split, with the exception of Project leaders who generally don't think that this is the case

The most telling inter-level disagreement relates to working in silos. Research support staff, Project leaders/PC and Regional Directors/DD all strongly feel that this is the case, while Senior Management don't think so at all and, strangely, almost half the Scientists don't seem to know.

These should all definitely be explored during an online discussion in order to further unpack the above findings. It is essential to get to the heart of the blockages in order to continue in the KM strategy process.

Recommendations and next steps

The following recommendations stem from both the above analysis of the survey data and the elaborate and thoughtful staff comments (question 27).

Recommendations for the KM strategy process itself (and for BDCD):

- Have a clear and transparent KM strategy process that engages staff and is well communicated to the organization
- Keep it simple, with a clear structure
- Have the KM person/team more involved in projects and more exchanges of ideas between them and research in the future

Recommendations for the environmental conditions for KM:

- Step up the involvement of management in KM, have them show their commitment by actively participating in KM activities
- Examine the institutional/cultural blockages for sharing and the power dynamics (e.g. collaboration undermined by credit for publications, controlling vs facilitating)

Recommendations for the KM strategy content:

- Raise awareness for KM, KM activities and services
- There is an urgent need to know what other people are doing and what they know: develop an internal, dynamic platform to find out about current projects, pipeline projects, lessons learned, best practice, etc.
- Develop both online and face-to-face learning-focused sharing opportunities
- Develop systematic procedures for knowledge transfer, especially to capture institutional memory, and guidelines for KS
- Establish topical/thematic Working groups, discussion groups or Communities of Practice for more inter-discipline and inter-regional collaboration and learning

Next steps

The immediate next step is for findings of the survey and report to be discussed at the workshop in Langkawi week of Jan 19th. Following this some focal group discussions with staff are planned to further inform the development of a strategy and plan to improve WorldFish's ability to better manage and share knowledge. This process should be as inclusive as possible and touch upon the three sets of recommendations above.