# Establishing and facilitating effective networks

A network is a group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. Virtual network members work across barriers such as time, distance and culture and use electronic communication and collaboration technology as their primary means of interaction.

By bringing together people who share particular interests and complementary areas of expertise, networks can act as an arena for focused interactions and help them strengthen and renew their individual and collective knowledge. In some cases this wellspring of expertise and cutting-edge experience can be utilised to inform policy.

To help you make the most of a network this guide gives brief guidance on:

- Starting up a new network
- Facilitating a network
- Sustaining a network
- Monitoring and evaluation a network
- Closing down a network

# 1. Starting up a new network

**Respond to demand**
Before establishing a new network check:

- Is there sufficient demand for your network?
- Does it build on an existing formal or informal community?

Communities cannot be created by force of will or policy. However, budding communities can be cultivated as long as there is a critical mass of potential members with sufficiently similar interests. A stakeholder analysis might be useful to explore their interests and to ask:

- What experience potential participants have?
- What additional expertise is needed?
- What formal or informal mentoring systems, if any, exist within the group?

**Have a clear purpose**
When starting a new network ensure you can answer the following questions:

- What are the objectives of your network? What are members meant to discuss, decide, influence?
- How does the network contribute to your wider programme / organisational objectives? To what use will members' deliberations be put?
- What are the goals for the network members, i.e. what are their motivations and expectations? What are the practical benefits of participating?

When setting your objectives bear in mind that networks can encourage learning and share knowledge in three directions:

- *Into* the network – information (publications, updates) and support (facilitation).
- *Within* the network – (mutual) sharing, coaching and exchange.
- *Out* of the network – lessons learnt, experience, contributions for policy dialogue can be extracted, collated and shared more widely.

## Cultivate broad ownership

Ensure that you ask potential participants what they want from the network and who will use its collective outputs. Support network self-definition by supporting a process where network members begin to build a shared identity, shared sense of purpose and shared agendas.

In conjunction with potential members, develop clear Terms of Reference:

- State clearly and briefly what the network is there to do.
- Set out the benefits and the outcomes of membership.
- Set out structure and organisation.
- Establish etiquette for participation.

## Organisational support

Successful networks also have positive (or at least neutral) organisational support. It is worth exploring the following questions, and building support in advance where needed:

- Is time spent on inputting to the network considered time well spent by line managers? Do potential participants include contribution to the network in the personal development plans for instance?
- Do senior managers value the role of networks as a means of generating learning and integrating this into practice?
- Do team leaders see themselves as critical to the network's success?

## Encourage helpful behavioural norms and rules

Successful networks need trust and a congenial, committed group – it is not a competition of who knows best but mutual respect for what each participant knows:

- Are participants prepared to ask for help and confident to offer it?
- Are responses valued?

Ensure a balance between giving and taking and adherence to the agreed norms and rules. There should be a recognised process for celebrating important assets and contributions and reconciling differences between members.

## Resource your network

Developing a network is a social process and it can take a significant amount of time and committed facilitation to establish, sustain and meet its objectives. Ensure the time and resources are available, in advance, to provide sufficient facilitation and leadership.

In contrast, technology costs tend to be low. Make best use of the tools available to your organisation, e.g. the intranet, email, skype and so on. Consider setting up a discussion group with discussion topics summarised in weekly email digests. Consider having different discussion groups for different types of interactions, e.g. one for posting specific questions and another for more general thematic discussions / learning. Participants may want a shared folders / workspace with a clear taxonomy to make working documents and other

network resources easily catalogued and accessible. A blog might also be considered useful by members – this could have one or multiple authors with relevant experience to share.

# 2. Facilitating a network

## Provide strong facilitation and leadership
Networks need strong facilitation and active and capable leadership on both content and process. It is normal for the facilitator(s) to be the most active members within a new network initially. This is usually followed by a rise in activity from the core membership group, and later by increasing participation from members outside this core group.

## Cleary define roles and responsibilities
Clearly define roles and responsibilities and consider division and rotation of duties in order to share the load, build the capacity of others and improve the sense of commonality among members in different regions and institutional positions.

You may, for example, have one facilitator responsible for organising, archiving and summarising relevance of information into the network; another encouraging within network learning; and another responsible for extracting and sharing lessons out of the network more widely. You might also choose to have a co-ordinator who oversees the entire network and monitors progress and identified experts who are committed to sharing experience, providing mentoring, and responding to member questions.

New joiners to an organisation often lack the contacts and social networks to facilitate successfully: would someone else be better placed or could duties be shared during a handover period?

## Encourage ownership
The vibrancy of a network is directly related to the degree to which members feel a sense of empowerment, so it is crucial to establish an atmosphere of ownership early on and maintain this throughout the life of the network.

## Look for, and encourage, champions
A relatively small percentage of members are actively engaged in communication and information sharing even in the most vibrant communities[1]. Among those, there are selected members who play a catalytic role. Their relatively high levels of activity and enthusiasm for the community can be leveraged to build wider momentum and energy within the group by providing them with recognition and partnering with them on network-building activities.

## Actively encourage participation
If your network includes members from different levels within the organisation, from different cultures and with different perspectives, broad participation is unlikely to occur without strong facilitation. Create a safe environment for people to interact by:

- Establishing an etiquette (and reiterating this occasionally if needed)
- Bilaterally interacting with and encouraging members who have particular expertise or appear reluctant to participate.

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[1] The rate of active participation for a successful virtual network is around 10% of members, but this does not mean that the remaining 90% ('lurkers') do not benefit[4].

- Intervening in a public way when one or more members behaves in ways that stifle participation.

**Maintain a balance**
Try to actively create balance between:

- The interest of the network (objectives) versus and the interest of the members (motivation).
- Face to face versus virtual communication (face to face contact is crucial, however sporadic, to renew enthusiasm and energy for the longer-term).
- Give and take, i.e. what is offered (information, experience, mentoring) versus what is demanded from members (questions, mentoring requests).
- Concepts, theories and policies versus stories and anecdotes.

**Create motivation**
Generate energy from the start by, for example, producing for a fast first product with immediate benefit for the majority of network members.

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**Typical facilitation activities**
In sum, facilitators, in combination with the network co-ordinator and identified experts, as per their outlined roles and responsibilities, typically need to:

- Listen to traffic on the network.
- Pull out the key relevant learning and encapsulate key ideas in an accessible way for future reference.
- Check that information is understood.
- Introducing new and challenging perspectives.
- Organise, tag and archive documents and discussions.
- Motivate co-operative behaviour.
- Conciliate differences between members.
- Provide, or facilitate other experts to provide, coaching on the topic of the network.
- Signal the availability of resources and opportunities outside the network.
- Respond to members' needs.
- Help organise, or alert members to opportunities for, face-to-face events.
- Induct new members.
- Match make members.
- Initiate distribution of key information.
- Represent the network in other fora.
- Promote the network and its achievements.
- Maintain motivation for participation by offering relevant incentives.
- Encourage participation and ensure feelings of inclusion.

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# 3. Sustaining a network

**Ensure the network benefits and engages its members**
Sustaining participant enthusiasm, and in turn network effectiveness, requires making the network valuable to its members.

- Minimise the time cost of participating in the network. For example, clearly indicate the relevance of a document circulated in the network in order to save hours of time for participants who would otherwise have to read the entire document to find the key points.
- Build political capital by keeping your champions informed of your progress, and sharing successes at all levels within the organisation.
- Organise face-to-face interaction / learning events periodically where possible.
- Stay on track – adapt to member needs but don't be hijacked by others who want to use the network and its members to communicate their message or do their work.
- Actively match-make people with similar interests / needs.
- Use your position as facilitator to highlight valuable contributions by name.
- Encourage and respond to individual feedback.
- Welcome new members and thank leavers for their participation.
- Invest time in inducting new members – share rules of participation, the network's objectives and examples of past activity / outputs; get to know them and introduce them to existing members.
- Don't contribute to email overload – agree to a standard subject heading for messages so that members can auto route emails to specific folders. If necessary, support participants to manage how they receive information and updates.
- Engage with participants on an equal footing.

### Reassess needs
If the network is faltering, the need for a network may need reassessing:

- Revisit the ToR and be honest about the network's status. Ask members for help or suggestions. Do they want the network to continue? Why? In what format?
- Consolidate, document and acknowledge what the network has already achieved and then set a new agenda based on current members' interests.
- Kick start the network again with a specific event.

# 4. Monitoring and evaluating a network

### Good monitoring starts with good planning
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) should include key stakeholders who have an interest in the findings and be based on consideration of who needs to know (e.g. donors, participants, your organisation?), what do these stakeholders need to know, and why do they need to know it?

In many networks, the following elements are monitored on an on-going basis:

1. Learning activities (e.g. what done, frequency, costs, members' views on relevance and perceived quality).
2. Members' engagement in activities (e.g. extent of membership, level of engagement of members)
3. Learning outputs (e.g. number and quality of knowledge generated / documents produced – quality could be assessed by reviewers outside the network)

The following elements are also monitored periodically:

4. Learning outcomes and impact (to what extent do members feel that the network has met its objectives and enabled them to learn as individuals; to what extent have they applied this learning to their work and how has this made a difference to their beneficiaries? Try also to capture, through systematically collecting anecdotal

evidence and feedback, less tangible benefits such as changes in members' confidence and attitudes towards applying new approaches for example)

5. Relationships developed between members (e.g. are members working more collaboratively, has this improved quality of work?)
6. Learning for others outside the group (e.g. number of downloads of learning outputs by individuals external to the organisation)

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Common evaluation methods include[5]:

- Document review of learning outputs
- Observation of network activities (such as network meetings)
- Survey – by email or web-based (try survey monkey)
- Semi-structured interviews - with sample of members (in person or by phone) and other stakeholders (donors, key informants)
- Stories of change written up
- Focus group discussions with members
- Statistical analysis of downloads, web visits

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# 5. Closing down a network

### Celebrate and close
When the network has achieved its objectives, keeping it running may be counter-productive. Plan to end well and celebrate its achievements.

# References
The above is drawn directly or adapted from the following:

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