

Knowledge Networks: Guidelines for Assessment

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This working paper presents guidelines for assessing the success of a knowledge network. The authors draw from their experience and research in the environment and international development fields.

The article recommends assessment criteria and questions in the following five elements of network performance and related indicators of success:

1. Effectiveness: Measuring effectiveness starts with the network's strategic plan. This plan articulates the agendas the network wants to influence and the strategies it plans to use to do this. Next, members should be involved in setting qualitative and quantitative "performance markers" that are used to record changes in the quantity, quality, and diversity of things such as relationships between people inside and outside the network; information generation; and communications approaches. To evaluate effectiveness, the authors suggest asking questions like has the knowledge generated by the network been relevant to those outside the network? What relationships have been built and for what purpose? Has the network created new insights and knowledge through the collaboration of members? Were important communication opportunities exploited?

2. Structure and governance: The article offers assessment suggestions in the areas of member selection and expectations, network structure and work plans, and decision-making. The authors offer specific assessment advice, depending on the network's operating structure. Some of the questions asked in this area are do member expectations correspond to the goals of the organization? Is the structure of the organization appropriate to its goals? Is the role and function of the network co-ordinator clear? Is member performance linked to risk and accountability?

3. Efficiency: The authors suggest that an assessment look at how the network mitigates the costs of collaboration. This falls into three areas: internal communications and interaction among members; institutional support; and systems and procedures.

Key messages

- In addition to being evaluated against their own performance objectives, knowledge networks should be assessed against optimal performance measures based on current research.
- Networks should be evaluated to optimize areas of energy and strength, moderate expectations, and strengthen critical areas that are underperforming.

Sample questions in the area include are the costs of collaboration a significant barrier to success? Is capacity being built across the network to strengthen members' ability to collaborate?

4. Resources and sustainability: Without resources, a network will experience significant barriers to achieving its goals. Assessments should look at the impacts of the network's stability in terms of membership and co-ordination, funding sources, network timelines and participant response times, and sustainability planning. Useful questions in this area include where is the leadership and what is the succession plan? What do members have to gain from membership? How does the network plan to renew itself?

5. Life-cycle analysis: An analysis of a network's organizational growth from initiation to maturity has yet to be done in the environment or development fields. The authors present a preliminary framework for assessing a network against "normal" performance and describe some of the characteristics of a normal life cycle.

The International Institute for Sustainable Development is working with networks to determine whether or not these guidelines are useful. The article's appendices include an eight-step process for a network assessment, a sample interview protocol for network members, and a sample interview protocol for people the network seeks to influence.

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