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Topic (iv): Collaboration

Transformative Opportunities of Implementing a Collaboration Platform in the Government Statistical Service of Hong Kong, China

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I. Introduction

1. The operation of the Census and Statistics Department (C&SD) of Hong Kong basically orientates its operation around paper files, emails, meetings and telephone discussions in a silo environment, similar to many other government departments and agencies. Under such an environment, convenient collaboration, knowledge retention and experience sharing are challenging as the files and media involved are often dispersed in different destinations and storage devices. Convenient retrieval and easy referencing of records and knowledge are in some occasions not well facilitated.

2. In view of the above constraints and improvement opportunities brought forth by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and collaboration tools, a Knowledge Management (KM) project was implemented by the C&SD several years ago with a view to forging the Department to become not only a KM empowered organisation, but also a dynamic, collaborative, connected and learning organisation. This is critical in the Internet era when we have to efficiently and effectively cope with an increasingly complicated and constantly changing business environment.

II. Project Objectives

3. The project has a KM focus, however we took the opportunity to engender transformation of our ways of working, sharing and learning in a holistic framework. Against this background, the project not only implemented a KM support system, but also endeavored the aforementioned transformation through major procedural and cultural changes.

4. This project has three operational objectives for execution: First, we shall improve our knowledge base and facilitate the leverage of knowledge assets in our work. The system will support convenient knowledge acquisition, storage, transfer, sharing and reuse, through the use of appropriate technologies.

Second, we shall create a collaborative working, sharing and learning environment where information, content, knowledge, business processes and tasks will be centrally organised and managed. Knowledge will be embedded in or integrated with business processes, so that KM activities will be seamless without extra effort. Third, we shall foster a culture more embracive towards collaboration, knowledge sharing, open communication and self-learning. In particular, colleagues will be encouraged to embrace knowledge sharing and work towards a common goal of organisational benefit. We also aim to reinforce our organisational competency through continuous learning with self-learning as the key.

5. Through these operational enhancements and change initiatives, we hope to bring forth stronger work coherence, higher operational efficiency, greater transparency and better service quality in the course of work.

III. Project Implementation

6. The project established a new platform of work, various collaboration facilities, selected Web 2.0 tools and a new culture to embrace changes. The project implementation has two phases, viz. system implementation and change management. The system was launched in end-2010. Change management has started some time before system launch and is being continued. The system was developed using a combination of off-the-shelf technologies. These are all market-proven technologies which provide concrete foundation for a trusted system infrastructure and full range of collaboration functions. The following facilities are built in the collaboration platform to help loosen the organisational boundaries of silos and internal compartments within silos, and promote collaboration across organisational boundaries:

- (A) A web-based portal to provide a single access point to work, share and learn.
- (B) Workspaces for various collaboration workgroups to unify filing, discussion, external linking and access to various kinds of media in a single digital space.
- (C) Workflow management to support the initiation and completion of repeatable and predictable tasks in a visible environment.
- (D) Knowledge repositories as well as a powerful search engine and tagging function to enable colleagues to search for information within their workspaces and also globally within the system.
- (E) Wikipedia-like reference site to facilitate information retrieval and knowledge sharing.

IV. Facilities

A. The portal

7. The portal transforms the operation of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) by centralising all corporate information for daily operation, planning and development onto one platform. It presents to colleagues announcements, departmental news and relevant statistics for quick reference. It also provides links to knowledge repositories and other frequently referred information hubs. Indeed it is a single access point for colleagues across the GSS to work, share and learn. Except the front page, the portal is customisable. It allows colleagues to select a collection of handy tools (such as calendar, notepad, bookmarks, task lists) to support their daily routines and create their own “My Page” and “My Task” pages. In the near future, other IT applications will be integrated into the portal as port-lets so that colleagues can then gain access to other IT applications from the portal. In sum, colleagues can, through the portal, work and gain access to information and applications from any sub-offices with system connection.

B. Virtual workspaces and collaboration tools

8. The system transforms physical workplaces into virtual workspaces which connect various working units in the GSS together on a virtual work platform. Virtual workspaces are central to the

design of the system, since most if not all corporate contents will be deposited into different workspaces eventually. Collaborative workgroups are formed following the organisational set-up at all levels (i.e. by division, branch and section and projects) and also crossing the organisational set-up with reference to specific multi-disciplinary tasks and ad hoc endeavours. Workspaces serve as virtual work areas for individual workgroups to perform their daily work, collaboration, discussion, storing and sharing of content, information and knowledge. A set of collaboration tools, such as shared folders, discussion forums, group calendar, workflow management and co-authoring functions, is available within workspaces. The use of workspaces avoids the problem of work knowledge hidden behind email archives and local drives which are not accessible by others for reference later. This improves the Department's ability to leverage and preserve knowledge assets and foster the culture of collaboration and open communication.

C. Workflow management

9. Business workflow management, involving routing and tracking of tasks based on pre-determined business logics/rules and organisational policies, is available on the platform. The workflow management function supports knowledge delivery and capture in the process: Work knowledge, previous returns and important references will be delivered alongside with tasks requiring action to facilitate "learn during". The completed task, related deliverables and relevant work experience will be harvested and retained as work knowledge within workspaces for future reference to enable "learn before". Workflow applications can be created and configured directly by end-users upon changes in business conditions. Generic workflows and those customised ones are available for sharing and re-use. Such flexibility will greatly increase the agility of workflow deployment in the Department. This also saves duplicated efforts in re-inventing wheels and avoids repeated mistakes. This function is transformational in engendering dynamics in the system.

D. Knowledge repository and searching tools

10. A centralised knowledge repository and shared folders are available in the system for consolidating our knowledge assets into different knowledge domains. In the system, knowledge assets are classified and mapped into a specially designed taxonomy structure, under which related concepts or documents are grouped and classified into appropriate categories. This allows colleagues to deposit and search for work knowledge in a structured way. A powerful search engine is installed in the system to facilitate fast and accurate search by users in both their workspaces and also in the system space. To tackle unstructured contents and information such as emails, minutes and business processes, pervasive tagging by users is allowed where they are free to attach keywords to describe contents and processes. Tags provide an alternative way of searching where information items under the same tag could be displayed for easy reference. These search functions are most important in connecting users to the right set of information or knowledge. They are also essential to improving work productivity and providing relevant information for informed business decision-making in the GSS.

E. Wiki technology

11. Using the Wiki technology, a Wikipedia-like reference, call Statpedia, is set up to provide easy information retrieval and sharing of professional knowledge in the course of work. It will serve as a convenient hub for colleagues to co-author, deposit, search and browse concepts, definitions and glossary of terms on various statistical themes. In Statpedia, articles are collaboratively contributed and edited by users. Clear audit trail is maintained to ensure quality of contribution.

V. Transformative opportunities

A. From Workplace to Workspace

12. The introduction of virtual workspaces for collaboration redefines operation and business processes in the GSS. Rather than relying on the traditional ways of working in workplace such as meetings, emails and passing around physical files, the system transforms such business activities in workspaces with virtual communication, discussion and filing functions. Virtual workspaces will be the new platform of work supporting a new operating model which is flexible and efficient. Officers are no longer office bound and this new platform will be particularly suitable for those organisations with an agile field force. This indeed supports the “desk-sharing” and “work-from-home” arrangements in case of service exigency, disaster and business continuity situations. This workspace approach is transformational in that it gives the management a viable option not only from the business continuity perspective but also from the operational efficiency and flexibility point of view.

B. Continuous learning

13. The Department is committed to excellence. To this end, it has been striving to become a learning organisation with the facilitation of technologies, in order to enhance capacity building to sustain its competitive edges through organisational learning. The “Learning Corner” in the system is instrumental to the development of organisational learning. We are empowering colleagues to proactively learn on their own through the provision of a convenient platform and resourceful libraries to stimulate self-learning and continuous learning. The “Learning Corner” will facilitate not only training related to posting and orientation, but also expanding the repertoire of colleagues in dealing with new issues and business needs through continuous personal development. Experts and coaches are also attending some specialty discussion forums to solve work-related questions and offer advice online. A “We Share” workspace will be introduced where colleagues can store links to business-related references and materials identified in the Internet world for sharing with colleagues. With all these facilities and support, we wish to permeate the idea and practice of continuous learning and self-learning in the Department.

C. Generation next and knowledge transfer

14. The platform will contribute to the sustainable development of the Department in the future years where “Generation Next” will mature and prevail in our workforce. While open communications and social network are the key trends in this generation, youngsters are now growing up with the habit of sharing, collaborating and messaging. Providing a collaborative platform of work and communication will greatly facilitate the future generations of workers to work, share and learn in a flexible way. Furthermore, with the impending wave of retirement of experienced officers shortly in the coming five to ten years, the knowledge transfer from retiring officers to novices would be a big challenge. The old method will not work and transformation is the key. It is envisioned that the system will not only become a platform for existing colleagues to work, collaborate and learn, but also the most important bridging tool for different generations of officers to engage in knowledge retention and experience transfer.

VI. Key success factors

15. In the course of system implementation, we focused on the reinforcement and promotion of a knowledge sharing and self-learning culture within the GSS. Colleagues are in particular encouraged to embrace KM, sharing and self-learning towards a common goal of organisational benefits, creating an atmosphere of sharing, trust and self-motivation amongst colleagues is fundamental to work collaboration, knowledge sharing and self-learning. Two key success factors are identified below.

A. Change management

16. The success of the change of platform of work to the new workspaces depends largely on the support of colleagues and their dedicated participation in the transition period. Hence a change management strategy involving them early is critical. During the system customisation stage, colleagues concerned have been involved to review and refine the various functions of the system. Briefing sessions and seminars have been conducted for colleagues to understand the concepts and benefits of KM and the collaboration platform. In order to gather support in operating the system, a large number of colleagues have been designated with specific responsibilities such as KM Coordinators, Content Managers and Process Managers in supporting and adopting KM and collaboration in their daily work. To guide the smooth implementation of the project for general users, trainings were scheduled, protocols defined and manuals prepared to stipulate standards, procedures and practices for the proper use of the system. A sand-box area was provided early for colleagues to build and test their workspaces and accustom with the various tools provided there. Continuous training to assist adoption of the new system is regularly organised and end-user support is provided through hotline and help desk.

B. Technology

17. The system was developed using a combination of commercial off-the-shelf technologies. These are all market-proven technologies that provide concrete foundation for a trusted system infrastructure and full range of collaborative functions. Simple and intuitive interfaces facilitate users to easily click through various modules and functions of the system. The collaborative platform can be accessed easily through web browsers, at any office location and even at home for some officers with VPN enabled notebooks. A multitude of collaboration tools are available and users can select their own tools and customise their own tab pages for use. The major consideration is to adopt technologies which are easy to understand and use, so that colleagues adapt quickly and easily to the new collaboration platform.

VII. Conclusion

18. While the transformative opportunities are clear, the ensuing journey to accomplish them is incremental. Colleagues are encouraged to embrace knowledge sharing, collaboration and self-learning, make full use of the facilities, apply them in their daily work and adapt to the new platform and culture. Since they have to invest time and effort to define workspaces, prepare new folders, re-engineer work processes and migrate old functions to the new platform, their effort and dedication are crucial to the success of the transformation. The underlying approach adopted is to bring out the advantages of collaboration, the edges of the system and the benefits of self-learning as early as possible to gain quick buy-in. The convenience offered, efficiency gained and productivity unleashed in the system and through new work practices will help engender continuous commitment of colleagues to work collaboratively, share knowledge and learn continuously.

19. In this era of “Internet of Things”, open communication and social network are the dominating trends amongst the younger generations. Adopting a virtual platform of work, communication and learning will greatly facilitate the future generations of officers to work, share and learn in “their” way. We must not forget that sooner or later we have to hand over our responsibilities to the newer generations. Establishing an appropriate platform to facilitate the process is crucial to the effective and efficient knowledge and experience transfer.