

# **Small Projects as Winners in the Organizational Learning Network**

*Mika Sihvonen*

*School of Information Sciences, University of Tampere, Finland, mika.sihvonen@uta.fi*

*Miikka Sipilä*

*School of Information Sciences, University of Tampere, Finland, miikka.m.sipila@uta.fi*

## **Abstract**

In this paper we argue that small development projects can be seen as the key actors in a large formal network of projects. The reason for this study were the observations made during the joint seminars and face-to-face meetings held for the overarching project network. The small projects or small teams of participatory projects remarked that learning experiences on those occasions were versatile and that there were a lot of possibilities for collaboration with other projects. At the same time, the people in the large projects considered themselves as information providers rather than as actual learners. The study focuses on the network of projects in a large national ESF development programme. One of the main goals of the development programme was to achieve a proper level of information sharing between its projects. The programme supervisors envisioned that, since all the projects had the same the target group of adult citizens, there had to be information to share during the programme's run. In the right circumstances that could lead to organizational learning experiences and a sense of community. This research was conducted using a mixed approach involving qualitative and quantitative methods. The data was collected from an online survey and an interview round covering all development projects.

Even though the resources for networking are usually limited in a small project or a project team, the dynamics and flexibility of small actors make information sharing easier. Small teams can implement learnt practices more easily, because there is no large scale sub-network to consider. A large project tends to work as an isolated unit and for each of its participatory projects the need of networking with their peer projects is lower. In this research learning is aimed at good or promising practices, which can be seen as artefacts that are disseminated and developed by the participating projects. As a conclusion we suggest that the teams or projects in a network should be equal in size if the network requires interaction for information sharing and learning. A large, network-type project could also participate, however it would need personnel who are in charge of information sharing.

## **Keywords**

Organizational learning, project network, small project, best practices

## **Background**

In a network of development projects there can be many kinds of barriers to collaboration. Lack of time, administrative bureaucracy or a sense of isolation are the most common ones mentioned. Moreover, competition, a lack of trust, or too much focus on a project's own goals rather than the network's goals also create challenges. Furthermore, the need to network may be lower if a project already has diverse networks. The supervisor's ESF programme and the studied network's 27 development projects have set goals about sharing information and close networking between the projects. Previous experiences led to the idea of deepening the knowledge about the role of small projects in a large network of projects. This research is very important considering the future efforts of creating formal networks of projects. As there are considerable challenges to create and maintain such a network, one solution may concern the sizes of the selected projects. The research question is: How does a project's size affect learning when building a formal network of projects?

We could discuss whether the traditional definitions of social networks apply in mere formal communities of project members, where connections between actors are few and the work itself is done rather in isolation. The shared goal to carry out the project properly and develop services for adult citizen refers to the community

rather than the network. However, we argue that the network approach is the key to understand the complex learning processes in several projects.

## **Learning organization, best practices and social capital**

A learning organization is, according to many researchers, the ideal state that work communities should aim at (see e.g. Senge 1990; Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell 1991). There are many approaches to organizational learning in research literature. Organizational learning is seen as a progressing cycle where tacit knowledge transfers to explicit (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995), or where the learners are exploring the relationship between actions and outcomes (Dixon 2000). Argote & Kane (2003) suggest that, despite the challenges in learning processes compared with the homogeneous group, the level of innovation is higher when the group is heterogeneous. However, many scholars agree that learning is not occurring automatically - there must be a will to learn (Senge 1990; Dixon 2000).

Saarelainen (2007) states that best practices are not easily measured and evaluated as objective realities. Rather, they are socially constructed realities in peoples' minds. Seikkula and Arnkil (2006) argue that best practices are not simple, transferable articles. Proper management should accompany good work in actual practice. When best practices are transmitted into other contexts, the significance of local actors and their interests cannot be ignored. Arnkil et al (2010) remind about the troublesome definition of best practice. It is often hard or even impossible to do research about what is absolutely the best possible practice that could be implemented.

Social capital often plays a considerable role when social networks are studied. The resources that exist in social relationships between individuals are key assets in social networks compared to the resources that a specific individual has. To access these resources in a network, actors must be aware of available assets and exploit the social ties. Project managers play a significant part in a project's communication flows. Therefore, they can be the main actors, responsible for the project's networking. Within the scope of large-scale, national development programmes we must remember that many of the people involved in the participating projects have ties to other projects via personal networks, or on account of a common background organization. It warrants the assumption that the threshold for networking and learning in the overarching network is lower if you are working with people you already know. (Daly, Moolenaar, Bolivar & Burke 2010.)

## **Methodology**

### **Small and large development projects**

There were 14 simultaneously ongoing projects in the overarching network. They could be divided into small and large project actors. The large actors had at least two sub-projects constituting their project entity. The large projects could be considered as network-based sets, consisting of different participating sub-projects separate from the overall project coordinators. All of the large projects had their own systems for project communication and knowledge management. Some of these practices derived from the paradigm in common background organizations and from experience with prior projects. Hence, achieving organizational learning and continuous improvement is not an easy task for an overarching network (Immonen & Järvenpää 1998).

There were eight large projects with at least three participating sub-projects (on average 9 members involved) and six small projects with no sub-projects. A small project could be defined as a 1- to 3-person project team that has no inner network of sub-projects inside their project. However, the small projects were able to form many kinds of work-related networks as part of their operation. Even without sub-projects, there might be a group of external, hired educators, or commercial service providers, such as printing houses or advertising agencies, involved. The links to the background organization could also be strong, particularly, when project personnel were working part-time for the project and the remaining hours for the organization.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through an online questionnaire and there were a total of 19 project members or sub-project members that answered the questionnaire. 15 of them were project leaders. In the first part of the questionnaire we wanted to study the interests that projects under the overarching development programme shared. The questions related to general possibilities for active citizenship and the development of open learning environments.

The second half of the questionnaire related to networking. It had questions about positive and negative sides to project networking, as well as about typical challenges. At the same time, we asked what kind of networking activity the project members preferred during the programme. The workshops and networking seminars gained the most positive evaluations. The general amount of collaboration between the projects was rather low. There were nine projects that had some level of collaboration with another project, but there were no significant differences between small or large projects where collaboration was concerned. On account of the low networking activity and some conflicts in the collected data, we decided not to conduct a social network analysis at this point in the research.

After the online survey, we interviewed project members. The interviews were planned as semi-structured, because we wanted to be prepared to include the issues that interviewees found interesting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Results

According to the interview results, there were networking differences between larger and smaller projects, that are shown below as benefits gained and personal attitudes displayed. In addition, the networking environment has an impact on the results. For example, the start of the development programme was a bit problematic, since the plans of the proposed networking style within the projects had not reached all the project workers. In the beginning, the programme caused a lot of different kinds of extra work for the project managers and the network brought even more issues to consider. The larger projects also already had many different actors to work with and networking with other projects felt like extra work.

**Table 1. Themes that characterize the networking abilities of small and large projects.**

	Small Project	Large Project
Starting point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confusing situation at the beginning, networking within the programme not known</li> <li>No special plans for networking in programme-level</li> <li>There can be competition for funding -&gt; Unsecure to reveal all the project information.</li> </ul>	
Trust in community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other projects/personnel usually unfamiliar</li> <li>Security that larger entity can give, not feeling alone in the project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Someone from the project organization usually knew other projects some level</li> <li>Strong ties to participatory projects</li> </ul>
Network-driven information and best practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is happening in other projects?</li> <li>Current trends in the field, among the target group</li> <li>How to organize ESF-related paper work?</li> <li>Best practices challenging to identify</li> <li>No resources to test other practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project mainly gives information for shareholders</li> <li>Other projects can be seen as receivers of information</li> <li>Background organization handles the bureaucracy</li> <li>Team in participatory project had time and resource to utilize the best practices if close enough to their goal</li> </ul>
Networked learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technical issues, project routines, contacts to other projects' experts</li> <li>Flexible information sharing</li> <li>Learning from other projects</li> <li>Sharing best practices make the project well-known.</li> <li>More joint face-to-face meeting needed with extra time to get familiar with other projects' personnel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning how to share information and adapt message for different audiences.</li> <li>Focus on networking inside project</li> <li>Information sharing with the participatory projects.</li> <li>Face to face-meetings succeeded but needed clear agenda</li> </ul>

One often mentioned advantage of small organizations was the security that the network gives. Smaller organizations may not have other colleagues working with similar issues. For example, some project personnel worked in a traditional type of organization, such as a museum or a library, where the professional use of modern devices and applications would not be that common. Here the network could help smaller projects to get answers to different issues.

One third of the questionnaire respondents evaluated the meetings as of average or minor importance when it came to the overall benefit that the project delivered. The rest evaluated the meetings as more positive in that respect. The distribution of answers indicated that the small projects on average evaluated the meetings more positively. The written arguments also showed a difference in the expectations that project members had of meetings. Some felt that their project could serve as a good example in the session, while others wanted to use the meeting as a developing tool for the project and their own expertise. Some of the answers were related to the

project's administrative questions. The networking was said to be challenging due to bureaucracy. The ad hoc collaboration was hard to establish, because it required modifications to the project plan.

## Discussion

The influence of the background organization was seen clearly in the practices concerning information technology. If the organization has secured instruction, support and administration for an online environment, there is no need to use a tool that another project has had promising experiences with. However, there can be a significant amount of information that relates to online practices and the use of information technology. The main challenge to exploiting these experiences is the lack of documentation. Even if a member of a small project can explore the procedures developed by other projects, there are limited resources for gaining deeper knowledge through discussion inside the network. Within the scope of the large-scale, national development programme we must remember that many of the people involved in the projects have ties to other projects via a common background organization, or via personal networks. IT warrants the assumption that the threshold for networking and learning in the network could be lower when you are working with people you already know.

When it comes to suggestions for the future, according to this study, the amount of learning and transfer of best practices is higher for small projects, or relatively independent project teams like in sub-projects. There are substantial needs for new tools and practices to be modified for the operations of the projects. The dynamics of a small project allow for effortless implementation of new practices. However, the amount of time-tested practices would be much lower in a network that consists only of small projects. We argue that there have to be large projects involved in the network to ensure a sufficient amount of practices to consider. If there is coordinator in the overarching project network, face-to-face meetings can be a crucial channel for transferring the best practices. Even though there are possibilities for organizational learning in several phases of the networking process, the differences in learning experienced between the small and large projects must be taken into consideration.

## References

- Argote, L. & Kane, A.A. (2003). Learning from direct and indirect experience in organizations: The effects of experience content, timing, and distribution. In P. Paulus and B. Nijstad (Eds.) *Group Creativity: Innovation through Collaboration*. 277-303. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Arnkil, R., Järvensivu, A., Koski, P., & Piirainen, T. (2010). Exploring the Quadruple Helix. Report of Quadruple Helix Research for the CLIQ Project. Tampere: Work Research Centre, University of Tampere.
- Daly, A., Moolenaar, N., Bolivar, J. & Burke, P. (2010). Relationships in reform: the role of teachers' social networks. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 48(3). 359–391.
- Dixon, N. (2000). *Common Knowledge. How companies thrive by sharing what they know*. Boston Massachusetts: Harvard business school press.
- Immonen, S., & Järvenpää, E. (1998). Building Network Organizations—Implications for Organizational Culture and Leadership. *Human Factors in Organizational Design and Management—VI*, 27-32.
- Nonaka, I. & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. & Boydell, T. (1991). *The Learning Company: a Strategy for Sustainable Development*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Saarelainen, T. (1999). The Consumption of Best Practises. How to Understand New Public Management. In Rouban, L. (eds.). *Citizens and the New Governance. Beyond New Public Management*. EGPA Yearbook. Amsterdam: IOS Press, 187-198.
- Seikkula, J. & Arnkil T.E. (2006). *Dialogical meetings in social networks*. London: Karnac Book.
- Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. NY: Doubleday.