Upfront and Beyond: Connecting the Community of New BBC Staff

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we're aiming to present our research into the BBC's induction programme Upfront. Upfront was set up in September 2002, in answer to staff complaints that there was no proper induction into organisational culture. One of the stated aims of the programme was to help new joiners establish collaborative cross-functional networks. We focused our research into how and why these networks were established, what was the role of technology in maintaining them and how they helped organisational learning.

Our theoretical grounding was the social learning theory, particularly the work of Etienne Wenger. We wanted to establish whether Upfront alumni formed their own communities of practice, and what was their impact on organisational learning.

Keywords
Induction, communities of practice, organisational learning, networks

INTRODUCTION

Background to cultural change in the BBC

In January 2001, one year after Greg Dyke joined the BBC as the new Director General, one of his over-riding impressions of the organisation was that it was "full of talented people but that it was very dull". Following consultation with Organisational Development specialists, a major change initiative was launched in February 2002 by Greg Dyke; it was called One BBC – Making it Happen. Staff were involved in consultation exercises run across the BBC, which resulted in seven key themes:

- One BBC – how can we successfully collaborate across organisational boundaries

- We are the BBC – what are our values and behaviours we expect from people inside the BBC

- Audiences – how can we get closer to their needs

- Creativity – how can we encourage greater creativity across the whole organisation

- Leadership – what do we want from our leaders at all levels in the BBC

- Just Do It – where do we need to reduce the bureaucracy that holds us back

- Great Spaces – how can we build a creative environment for the organisation to work in

How Upfront was designed

One theme that emerged from the staff consultation exercises was a feeling that the BBC did not induct people into the organisation successfully. This later had an effect on retention figures - i.e. people were so dissatisfied with their first 6 months that they left. It also did not allow people a smooth transition into the organisation or engage them with any over-arching view of the BBC and its values.

BBC Training and Development was asked to propose learning interventions for a number of MiH activities, among them the proposed new staff induction programme. Its design was slightly different from other learning interventions. We normally consult users of the potential intervention about requirements, preferred learning styles, etc. As the potential users were not yet in the BBC, we did a small-scale research project on what fairly new staff would have liked to have been told when they joined the organisation.

Following these consultations, we launched a new BBC-wide induction programme in September 2002. Staff were invited to come up with a name, and Upfront was chosen as best exemplifying the honest and direct

approach to organisational learning that the programme wanted to convey. The key aims of Upfront (as stated in the paper submitted to the BBC Executive Committee) were:

- to support the One BBC – Making it Happen change initiative

- to inspire and align new joiners with the BBC's vision, values and aims

- to provide new joiners with the information they need to do their jobs effectively

- to help them establish collaborative cross-functional networks

- to enable them to be influential BBC ambassadors, internally and externally

Upfront was designed as a four-day residential programme. Initially it was always based in London, though there are now plans to take it out into the regions (in February 2004, a course is being run in Glasgow). The course runs approximately 35 times a year, and there are 80 to 100 participants per programme. The following is a brief outline of the four-day programme:

Day 1
- Sessions on the history of the BBC, organisational structures, editorial values, audience research, external challenges, etc.

- Evening – pub-style quiz based on general knowledge about the BBC

Day 2
- Hands-on tri-media day: participants get to learn about creating content for TV, Radio and Online

- Evening – Q&A session with a member of the BBC Executive Committee

Day 3
- Reinforcement of BBC values and behaviours – further explanation of the MiH projects and how staff can get personally involved and take responsibility for change

- Breakout sessions on living the BBC values – how to give and receive feedback, creative thinking for all (not just programme makers), how to find information and network across the organisation

- Tour of BBC TV Centre

- Evening – see live recording either for BBC TV or Radio

Day 4
- Bringing all aspects together into the programme game – each team of 10-12 people gets to pitch a commissioning proposal for a BBC programme in the medium of their choice (Radio, TV or Online)

As part of Day 2, participants get to create a personal web page that becomes part of the alumni site on the BBC Intranet. Because these web pages contain pictures of Upfront delegates, as well as a few brief personal details, participants use them to get e-mail addresses or phone numbers of people who they want to keep in touch after the programme. These pages are available for three months after the residential course, then taken down to make room for new delegates.

RESEARCH

Aim
In our research, we have focused particularly on the fourth aim of the programme – "to help new joiners establish collaborative cross-functional networks" (as quoted above). We wanted to find out how these networks were established, and particularly how, why and how long for they were maintained.

Method
We e-mailed an online questionnaire to everybody who had attended Upfront at intervals of one month, six months and one year prior to sending the questionnaire. Although Upfront is designed for new staff, it is also considered a valuable experience for existing staff, who get the chance to participate in a special Upfront for "old hands" twice a year. We included one of these groups of existing staff in the research, to see how their experiences compared to new joiners. The questionnaire was sent on 15th December 2003 to 242 staff of which:

- 69/72 who attended Upfront one month earlier (new staff) replied   96%
- 6/73 who attended Upfront three month earlier (special event for existing staff) replied   8%
- 22/61 who attended Upfront six months earlier (new staff) replied   36%
- 9/36 who attended Upfront one year earlier (new staff) replied   25%

The questions asked were:

1.   In terms of developing new friends/contacts, how would you rate the importance of the four days you spent on Upfront? (ranging from 1 – not important, to 5 – exceptionally important)

2.   Have you kept in touch with any of the people you attended Upfront with? (straight yes/no option)

3.   If No – why have you not kept in touch with any of the people you attended Upfront with? (options given were: didn't know how to; didn't feel the need to; and a free-text box for other)

4.   If Yes – how long is it since you have had contact with someone you attended Upfront with? (options given were: 1 week; 1 month; 3 months; 6 months; 1 year)

5.   How did you get in touch with the people you attended Upfront with? (multiple answers possible from options including: Upfront Intranet site; e-mail; phone; other)

6.   Why did you get in touch with the people you attended Upfront with? (multiple answers possible from options including: social – to go out; support – help or advice; work – help get something done; other)

7.   Please give an example of how the people you have met on Upfront have helped you. (free-text box)

The results of the questionnaire were collected and collated one month after e-mailing the online form. The results were imported into Excel, graphed and then interpreted. The results were converted to percentages due to the unequal response rates within the groups, which should make them easier to compare.

Results
The results (Table One) seem to indicate a positive reaction to the stated aim of Upfront – "to help new joiners establish collaborative cross-functional networks" (as quoted above).

Questions	One month (New staff)		Three months (Existing staff)		Six months (New staff)		One year (New staff)	
Response rate	96%		8%		36%		25%	
Kept in touch?	Yes 72% No 28%		Yes 65% No 35%		Yes 75% No 25%		Yes 57% No 43%	
Importance of network? 1 = not important 5=exceptionally important	Yes (kept in touch) 1 =2% 2 =34% 3=29% 4=26% 5=9%	No (kept in touch) 1= 23% 2 =35% 3=35% 4=8% 5=0%	Yes (kept in touch) 1 =0% 2 =0% 3=50% 4=50% 5=0%	No (kept in touch) 1= 50% 2 =0% 3=0% 4=0% 5=50%	Yes (kept in touch) 1 =6% 2 =32% 3=32% 4=24% 5=6%	No (kept in touch) 1= 60% 2 =40% 3=0% 4=0% 5=0%	Yes (kept in touch) 1 =20% 2 =20% 3=40% 4=0% 5=20%	No (kept in touch) 1= 0% 2 =50% 3=0% 4=25% 5=25%
If no why?	No need =76% Too busy=8% Know how=0% Other =16%		No need =50% Too busy=0% Know how=50% Other =0%		No need =33% Too busy=33% Know how=17% Other =17%		No need =33% Too busy=0% Know how=0% Other =67%	
If yes how long since last contact?	1 week= 81% 1 month=19%		1 week= 50% 1 month=50% 3 months=0%		1 week= 50% 1 month=31% 3 months=19% 6 months=0%		1 week= 32% 1 month=17% 3 months=17% 6 months= 17% 1 year=17%	
How kept in touch?	e-mail=60% alumni site=23% phone =8% Other =9%		e-mail=75% alumni site=0% phone =25% Other =0%		e-mail=68% alumni site=16% phone =5% Other =11%		e-mail=57% alumni site=14% phone =14% Other =15%	
Why kept in touch?	Social=69% Work=16% Support=7% Other=8%		Social=67% Work=0% Support=33% Other=0%		Social=47% Work=35% Support=6% Other=12%		Social=57% Work=15% Support=28% Other=0%	

Table One: results of the questionnaire sent to Upfront alumni

Response rate

The response rate was extreme, ranging from an enormous 96% for those who attended the month before to 8% for existing staff. One can normally expect a response rate of 20-30% when sending out questionnaires in the BBC. The 96% response rate from the most recent Upfront intake may have occurred either because they thought it a normal follow-up (evaluation) of the event and therefore thought they had to respond, or because they still felt energised by their experience and wanted to contribute. The low response rate from the existing staff (who attended Upfront three months earlier) may indicate they had already established networks and did not require the organisational structure of Upfront to create new ones.

Did they keep in touch?

In most cases two thirds of people attending Upfront kept in touch after the event. The percentage was high even in the existing staff group. The group that showed the lowest rate of keeping in touch was the group who attended a year ago. In this group only 57% kept in touch, but of these 32% have been in touch within the week of filling out the questionnaire. The likely conclusion is that after a year new staff no longer need the support of their Upfront colleagues and have formed their own communities (some of which may indeed include their former Upfront colleagues).

Importance of Upfront for developing networks

Not surprisingly most of those surveyed who did not keep in touch did not value the relationships and networks created by Upfront highly. The only exception were those who attended a year ago, some of whom placed a high value on networks despite not having kept in touch. There could be two likely explanations for this: either they had initially kept in touch but since lost contact, or were perhaps regretting not keeping in touch and therefore tended to place a higher value on establishing networks. Of those who did keep in touch the importance of Upfront for creating networks seemed average – hovering around 2, 3 and 4.

Why not keep in touch?

Those who did not keep in touch were asked why – "No need to" was the highest response. This could mean that they had already developed their networks and communities and didn't feel the need to stay in touch with fellow Upfront alumni. "Too busy" was the second highest response, which is understandable due to the busy nature of most people's jobs, and may indicate that they will get in touch if the need arises. Other explanations included not feeling part of the Upfront community, or geographical distances (though the latter one is difficult to explain, considering the nature of preferred contact – by e-mail).

How long since last contact?

Of those who kept in touch most had been in touch in the last week (from when the questionnaire was filled out), including those who attended one year ago. This seems to highlight the importance of the relationships and networks formed.

How did they get in contact?

The alumni site was intended on being the main point of contact for Upfront delegates. But the most popular way of contacting each other turned out to be e-mail. We do know, however, through anecdotal evidence that Upfront delegates obtain each other's e-mail addresses from the Alumni site. The use of e-mail at the BBC for both work and social contacts is exceptionally high, and – coupled with geographical distances - it is not really surprising that alumni members prefer this form of communication. Answers given in the "other" category included "bumping into people" in corridors & cafes, or meeting them in the workplace.

Why did they get in contact?

Contacting each other for social reasons was the highest response in all groups. Work and support were about equal. Where more detailed responses were given, however, it became obvious that there was a big overlap between work and social, with social gatherings used to exchange workplace information and contacts.

Some of the free-text explanations of why people got in touch after the residential event included:

- Helping each other on programmes

- Help with resources such as the slide library, tape transfers, etc.

- Pitching programme ideas (including some developed as part of the programme-making exercise on Day 4 of the residential)

- Checking something before making official enquiries

- Passing on information to other parts of the BBC

- Attachment/job opportunities

- Knowing what other departments do

- Chatting to people they don't work with

- Feeling a part of One BBC – something bigger than own department

- Help with not feeling alone (particularly when faced with work pressures)

- There was one instance of workplace bullying that one Upfront delegate helped another sort out.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of our research seem to indicate quite clearly that networks formed during the four-day residential course are mostly being maintained and valued long after the course had finished. How do these networks, however, contribute to learning – both on a personal and organisational level?

Wenger (1998) sees learning as a result of participation in communities of practice. According to his and other situated theories of learning, people naturally form networks in their private and work life, and it is by participating in those networks (or communities of practice) that learning occurs. Learning is, therefore, not a one-way transfer of pre-determined knowledge, but a fluid process of negotiating meaning through practice.

Newcomers to any organisation are naturally inducted into the existing communities of practice. The purpose of a specific induction programme, however, is to then create another community of practice – a community of newcomers. This community negotiates its own rules and meanings, creates its own support networks and helps its members make sense of organisational practices.

By introducing both the residential and the post-course support mechanisms in its Upfront programme, BBC Training and Development has followed Wenger's advice about induction programmes: "With respect to newcomers, it may be better to intersperse moments of information sharing and reflection with moments of peripheral engagement in practice than to "front-load" all the classroom training and call that "learning". The former approach grounds classroom learning in practice as well as involves the community in integrating the growing understanding of newcomers into its practice." (Wenger, 1998)

In this way, new staff are acting as "brokers across the boundaries" to again use Wenger's terminology. Their multi-membership of both their communities of practice in the immediate working environment and the community of newcomers (as well as any other communities they may be members of) puts them in a good position to renegotiate the history and practice of working life in the BBC and thus help organisational learning.

According to Wenger, boundaries "are the likely locus of the production of radically new knowledge. They are where the unexpected can be expected, where innovative or unorthodox solutions are found, where serendipity is likely, and where old ideas find life and new ideas propagate." (Wenger, 1998)

What is the role of technology in this process? Dan Huttenlocher, quoted in The Social Life of Information (Brown & Duguid, 2000), argues that while digital technologies are adept at maintaining communities already formed, they are less good at creating them from scratch. Addressing this problem, John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid propose setting aside distance and delivery as primary goals of new technologies of learning; instead, they argue, "the aim should be access (…) the more isolated learners are, whether physically or socially, the more they need access to peers, communities of practice, and other social resources" (Brown and Duguid, 2000). This access creates a new "community of interpretation", as Brown and Duguid call it, in which geographically-distributed "members construct and negotiate a shared meaning" (Brown and Duguid, 2000).

Or, according to Wenger: "…coming together from a variety of locations for a training session can be an occasion for creating a community among people who might not otherwise have much opportunity to meet." (Wenger, 1998)

By bringing people together for a residential training programme, Upfront has created a community of newcomers and then given them the tools to maintain contact but not proscribing the nature, purpose or frequency of that contact.

Goodyear (2002) states that "we cannot create or design communities – the best we can do is help set up some organisational forms or structures that are likely to be conducive to the formation and well-being of convivial learning relationships. Learning communities may then emerge." Upfront provides the organisational structure on which new staff create their communities and networks. Although Upfront delegates cannot determine who attends their event, they can determine who they form and continue relationships with. These relationships are usually continued utilising information and communication based technology until the new staff member is fully integrated into the BBC and its practices.

Gundry, quoted in Saunders (1998) defines a learning organisation as "one which can adapt and re-invent its structures, processes and behaviours to accommodate (at worst), anticipate or influence (at best) external factors which will determine its survival." By maintaining geographically-distributed and cross-functional networks, Upfront delegates are helping create new organisational learning, as well as helping the BBC become a learning organisation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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