WSP Group

■ Technical Coordinator Workshops

The potential benefits of good knowledge management in a multi-disciplinary consultancy as large and geographically dispersed as WSP Group are obvious. Even the 200 or so major projects they have in hand at any one time in this country — to say nothing of many more overseas — provide rich opportunities to learn lessons that have the potential to lead to better solutions and more efficient working in the future.

Not surprisingly, WSP's top management take learning and knowledge sharing seriously. In the UK, knowledge management is most fully developed in the property sector business, where it is led by two full-time staff in the Group Technical Centre in London. The GTC has built up a range of procedures and IT tools and an extensive library of electronic reference material, and is supported by two engineers in each office who act as links to local staff.

With a well-developed knowledge infrastructure in place, Group Technical Coordinator Stuart Alexander is focusing now on increasing buy-in and usage at the grass roots.

In a big and busy company like WSP well-proven working methods have considerable inertia, and it takes time and persistence to make systematic learning and knowledge sharing a habit for everyone. When WSP first became involved in Spreading the Word, local teams and offices still tended to develop their own solutions with little reference to experience elsewhere. It was hard to find staff willing and well-qualified to be local Technical Coordinators. And while experience in other industries suggests that the most valuable knowledge sharing often occurs in casual conversation with colleagues, people found that difficult in WSP's head-down, time-conscious culture.

All this is changing, but even today the value of learning from experience is still not fully recognised at local level and knowledge flow remains largely one way, from the centre outwards. The GTC estimate that the proportion of staff who are active knowledge contributors has increased from about 3% to 15% over the past two years, but they want to increase this further, and destroy the silo mentality for good.

To encourage more learning and knowledge sharing at a local level, WSP used participation in the Spreading the Word project as an opportunity to mount a series of regional **Technical Coordinator Workshops** and show the office coordinators how valuable local learning and person-to-person knowledge networking can be.

“Sharing Knowledge [for optimal client solutions]”

Banner headline on WSP web site

Starting points

The main elements in WSP's knowledge management system are :

- a Technical Reference Manual library of around 250 documents, together with bought-in libraries, specifications etc, assessible to all staff over the intranet

- a monthly Group Technical Bulletin produced by the GTC, which includes 'watch-it' notes

- a roadshow of seminars led by the GTC which visits each office every 6 months or so

- occasional one-day get-togethers for specific professional groups

- a technical 'help desk' service provided by the GTC

- a multi-topic discussion forum which automatically emails members when new items appear

- an electronic telephone directory (to which photos have recently been added) and a skills register, which staff are required to update annually

The Group Technical Centre has also developed a 'Project Life Cycle' procedure which includes provision for foresight and hindsight reviews. This became mandatory last year.

Technical Coordinator Workshops

The brief of the local Technical Coordinators — one building services and one structural engineer in each office — is to act as points of contact between their offices and the GTC, feed material from the GTC out to local staff, feed back local lessons learned, promote use of the knowledge base, and suggest improvements to the system.

The Technical Coordinator Workshops aim to foster a sense of community among the local coordinators and give them an opportunity to:

- compare experiences and discuss concerns with each other and with the GTC team

- learn about developments in the knowledge infrastructure, and

- learn about specific 'hot topics' in their discipline so that they can act as local experts.

From the GTC's point of view, the workshops are also an opportunity to get feedback on other components of the company's knowledge infrastructure.

To broaden involvement, each local coordinator is invited to bring a second person from their discipline, and centre heads are also invited. The GTC team form the chairman and secretary. The workshops are half-day events, starting with a sandwich lunch.

Four have been held so far, in Edinburgh, Leeds, Bristol and Gatwick, each covering 3 or 4 offices.

The response has been encouraging. The local coordinators have welcomed the opportunity to get together, and they have scored the events highly on feedback forms with the overwhelming majority of assessments 'good'.

The introduction of the Technical Co-ordinator Workshops and the Project Life Cycle procedure — which will make it harder for busy engineers to treat knowledge activities as a disposable luxury — mark an important stage in the evolution of WSP's knowledge management system. They give people at the grass roots opportunities to see for themselves what a systematic approach to learning from experience and knowledge sharing involves, and the personal and corporate rewards it can bring. And that, in turn, should leverage increasing value from the other parts of the company's knowledge infrastructure. ◼

"Very good. Good discussion, with a number of ideas to be taken forward"

"Great team feedback!"

Workshop participants

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