

‘Empowering Women to Make Confident Choices for Themselves’— Exploring Knowledge Management Strategies for Enhancing WIRE’s Information Services to Women

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Abstract

Knowledge management (KM) concerns the effective capture, use and exploitation of human knowledge and expertise for organisational advantage. It involves planned decisions on how to structure and utilise an organisation's know-how. While the human dimension remains the primary focus of KM, information and communications technologies are important enablers for organisational KM initiatives. Knowledge Management (KM) systems have been widely implemented in large commercial and government organisations since the mid-1990s. However, investment in expensive proprietary KM systems is out of the question for small community organisations operating with limited resources, tight budgets and a heavy reliance on volunteer labour. WIRE—Women's Information is a knowledge-intensive community organisation facing escalating costs from labour-intensive information management practices. For the survival of organisations such as WIRE, it is imperative that the effective KM strategies, processes and systems be implemented. A preliminary analysis has been undertaken at WIRE of current information and knowledge flows and processes and potential KM strategies for enhancing its women's information and referral services.

The paper identifies six major management challenges for community organisations that arise from the distinctive characteristics of the sector, and uses WIRE as a case example to explore how KM strategies could help to address those challenges.

Introduction

Organisations that are variously known as 'non-profit' organisations (Patton 1999), 'third sector' organisations (Lyons 2001), 'voluntary' agencies (Billis and Harris 1996), 'community' organisations (Cox et al 1987) or organisations engaged in 'community work' (Jacobs and Popple 1994; Thorpe and Petruchenia 1992; Twelvetreets 2002) or 'community development' (Kenny 1999; Ward 1993a; 1993b) have an increasingly important role to play in society. As Lyons (2001, p. xii) explains:

It is becoming widely recognised that economic and social development cannot be obtained by an overemphasis on either state or market and that a successful balancing of government and business requires a strong third sector.

These organisations are private, not-for-profit, with a strong democratic base, established by people acting voluntarily, and exist to provide services or benefits for particular community groups (Zander 1990). Putnam (1993; 1995a; 1995b) has argued that such groups develop civil society through building 'social capital' (ie trust, reciprocity, interdependence, and a focus on collective action for the betterment of society). This concept of social capital has become a popular focus of recent research into community networking (Trevillion 1999) and knowledge management (Lesser 2000).

This paper focuses on one such organisation, WIRE—Women's Information, and uses it as a case example to explore how knowledge management (KM) strategies can potentially assist 'third sector' organisations in dealing with the major management challenges facing the sector.

WIRE—Women's Information

WIRE is a free information, support and referral service for women, located in the Melbourne central business district. Established in 1984 as the Women's Information and Referral Exchange (WIRE), it now prefers to use the more explicit name 'Women's Information'. Its origins derive from an initiative of organisations including the Women's Electoral Lobby, Lifeline, the Victoria Police and the YWCA that saw the need for a specific community organisation to deal with complex queries from women seeking support that these organisations could not provide. Women had many questions concerning major life choices and their basic human rights and were seeking support and information to help them in their quest for solutions.

Eighteen years later, WIRE has evolved into a comprehensive information, support and referral service. The inaugural service area was the telephone service, staffed by women volunteers. This is still the backbone of the service, involving 60-80 volunteers. However, the service has diversified over the past few years to comprise also an online service (ie an Internet presence

and responses to email inquiries) and a 'walk-in' central city information centre—the Women's Information Centre (WIC), opened in 1999.

Through its telephone service, WIC and online information, WIRE aims 'to empower women to make confident choices for themselves.' Its vision is summed up in the slogan: 'strong, empowered women in control of their lives.' WIRE provides information and referral on a wide range of issues such as family life and relationships, separation, domestic violence, discrimination, self-esteem, depression, health and well-being, housing, employment, finance, education and legal issues.

WIRE has an extensive community information database from which referrals are made to a wide range of community organisations, self-help groups and individual practitioners such as female doctors, lawyers, counsellors and tradeswomen. WIRE aims to be accessible to women across Victoria and to provide them with services of the highest possible quality, delivered in a way that acknowledges and validates their experiences.

Key Management Challenges and Associated KM Issues

Several significant challenges for the management of third sector organisations arise from the distinctive characteristics of the sector. These are discussed under the headings: core values, human resources, governance, funding and accountability, evaluating performance, and organisational change. For each area, the broad management challenges are identified, followed by a discussion of pertinent aspects from the WIRE case study, and identification of related KM issues.

Core Values

One significant distinguishing feature of third sector organisations is the centrality of—and a strong commitment to—particular core values (Lyons 2001). Community work, by definition, implies a strong value orientation, including a commitment to social justice, democracy, liberation of the oppressed through collective activity, empowerment of the disadvantaged, self-help, respect for minority views and anti-discrimination (Twelvetrees 2002; Waddington 1994 ; Ward 1993a). A culture based around strong central values can be a powerful unifying and stabilising force. However, a strong values orientation can also trigger powerful emotions, unwillingness to compromise on key values, and the attendant risk of organisational conflict (Paton 1996). 'Staff with a strong commitment to old values or old interpretations of those values can be stubborn opponents of change.' (Lyons 2001, p. 153).

WIRE's Core Values

WIRE's core values are centred around a feminist framework and related notions of empowerment (eg see Gottlieb 1992; Thorpe and Petruchenia 1992; Kenny 1999). WIRE views women's problems as arising from unequal social structures, and seeks to reduce these inequalities through dialogue and social action. It seeks to assist women to develop skills to enhance personal control of their lives. The service is committed to social change, active learning and respect of diversity. Table 1 below summarises WIRE's core values.

Table 1 WIRE's Core Feminist Principles Driving Service Delivery

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly: • Women are disadvantaged by the structural inequalities of society. • Women's lives are influenced by their social and economic environments. • Women have a right to information to make decisions and choices in their lives. • Information and education can ameliorate this disadvantage. • Women require 'special' services because of the disadvantage they experience. • Women are in the best position to provide these 'special' services to women. 	<p><i>Specifically WIRE:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respects and acknowledges the diversity of women's experience. • Understands the need to balance women's differences and similarities. • Embraces and gives voice to a broad spectrum of feminist views. • Recognises that there is no one single feminist view. • Values robust debate focused on issues. • Sees all women as capable. • Values cooperation and collaborative processes. • Recognises there are many forms of power and influence. • Listens, supports and makes connections.
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Associated KM Issues

WIRE has clearly articulated these core values in statements of its vision and mission, underlying philosophy and principles driving service delivery—that are incorporated into its printed and online documentation, policy manuals and publicity materials. The core values are thoroughly enmeshed as a central focus of its thorough 13-week volunteer training courses and staff induction training, and are embodied in organisational processes.

This cultural embedding acts as a powerful unifying and stabilising force amidst a high turnover of staff and volunteers, and helps ensure consistency in service delivery over time. However, one potential risk is that the service reflects an older style of feminism and does not adapt appropriately to the changing social and political environment. As one staff member observed:

We really need to get out there and make ourselves known and make our services known. I think that WIRE ... has actually fallen down the list of priorities.... At the same time that has happened there has been quite a proliferation of other more high profile phone services.

It is imperative that WIRE has mechanisms in place to ensure that it is adequately responsive to current issues and realities. As earlier feminist social achievements are now taken for granted, other issues gain ascendancy and are allocated a higher priority on the political agenda. Demonstrating the ongoing relevance of feminist issues is a major challenge for WIRE—its survival depends on it. Having suitable mechanisms (human and technological) in place for responsive, interactive community networking between key stakeholder groups is essential. Finding more appealing and compelling ways to communicate the WIRE message is another challenge, eg through engaging storytelling (using ‘de-identified’ human interest stories).

Human resources

A distinctive feature of organisations in the third sector is their heavy reliance on volunteer labour (Lyons 2001). Many volunteers work for multiple organisations. Paid staff tend to have relatively low salaries and poor working conditions compared with their counterparts in business or government—they work longer hours, unpaid hours, have less opportunity for training, and so on. Managers also are generally less experienced, less trained in management, with relatively low salaries. The sector has disproportionately high levels of female and part-time employment.

However, for both volunteers and paid staff there are compensating factors and intangible benefits. These value-driven organisations tend to attract the highly committed—those who share a passion for the organisational vision and feel they can ‘make a difference’ through their contribution. Nonetheless an endemic problem in the sector is high turnover of volunteers and paid staff.

Ensuring an appropriate balance between volunteers and paid staff and effective management of volunteers (recruiting, training, matching and supporting) are key challenges. Many organisations under-resource and exploit their volunteer workforce. However, committing resources to developing and training volunteers is essential if the organisation is to get best value from them (Lyons 2001; Osborne 1996). Other management issues for voluntary organisations include accountability for service provision given the practical difficulties created by the sheer numbers and high turnover of volunteers (Leat 1996); and ensuring that trends towards greater formalisation of management and professionalisation do not deter volunteers. As Smith (1996) warned, the business/ management culture increasingly being applied to voluntary agencies potentially clashes with the spirit and values of volunteering.

Staffing at WIRE

Consistent with its mission, WIRE is staffed entirely by women. Paid staff include the manager and six other professional roles: coordinators of ‘development’ (ie PR and fundraising), finance

and administration, information systems and online services, the telephone service, volunteer training, and the information centre. Volunteers form the backbone of service delivery, fully staffing the telephone service. Board membership is also a voluntary role.

WIRE places great emphasis on recruitment and effective training and support for its volunteer workforce. Potential volunteers contact WIRE directly, or respond to specific promotion campaigns. There is a selection process to sift out any unsuitable candidates. Twice a year, training programs commence for a new batch of volunteers. These programs are scheduled for three hours a week over thirteen weeks, plus additional commitment of trainees to supervised shifts in the Phone Room. The training sessions provide a thorough grounding in the feminist framework, the WIRE culture, developing self-awareness, counselling skills and more technical skills such as using the WIRE community information database and information resources and mastering specific work processes and routines. After gaining experience with the telephone service, selected volunteers are offered advanced training for 'team leaders'. Team leaders coordinate shifts of volunteers staffing the telephone service and handle the more complex or difficult inquiries.

The effort and resources WIRE expends on training reap dividends in ensuring a high quality, reliable telephone service to clients. Nonetheless, WIRE is not immune to the high levels of volunteer turnover experienced by most community organisations. While a few stalwarts have been at WIRE for years, on average most volunteers remain for about 6-12 months. As one staff member explained:

Volunteers drop out all the time, and that is quite standard in the telephone services. Most of the women involved are very active—they study or work and they are committed to other things as well, so they move on. They never leave because they don't like it. They leave because there are other things they want to do. Life goes on.

Staff express frustration at the turnover of volunteers:

WIRE is a hungry machine and you have to keep training as many volunteers as you can and churning them out. And that doesn't necessarily equal quality. You can't impart culture quickly. And there's tension between having enough volunteers and 'training up' and raising the quality, the standard—and then we're vulnerable to losing them. It's all such hard work.

But the high turnover of volunteers is not altogether negative. As one volunteer commented:

With having new volunteers coming in all the time it's fresh, with new experience. I think that is really positive.

Volunteers derive a range of personal benefits from their work at WIRE:

I have found it wonderful because the support we get within WIRE. There is such a diversity of cultures as well and that's a great learning experience for all of us. It's wonderful to be with these women, all linked together without discrimination or judgements.

It's the first time in my life that I've been in a work situation where you're encouraged to be yourself, and your personal assets are encouraged. I found in the past with my work history

you have to go in and actually hang up your personality on the front door to survive. If you're slightly political, if you're slightly assertive or outspoken and it's not the norm it's not accepted. It's just been amazing to be in that environment—and now working amongst women has been quite incredible—the way that things are done differently. I approached my employer and said I'd like to cut my hours. That was all OK but they were a bit shocked that I was doing it for voluntary work. They didn't really understand why I would give up [paid] work for voluntary work.

Associated KM Issues

The staffing challenges identified above raise a number of KM issues for WIRE. Rapid turnover of both staff and volunteers highlights the need to capture certain relevant knowledge in explicit form before women leave the organisation. For example, one staff member who had previously worked in housing services prepared an information brochure and procedure for WIRE on how to handle calls relating to accommodation and housing. Another with training in suicide counselling prepared a protocol for handling calls with a person contemplating suicide. Staff knowledge of relevant personal or organisational contacts is included in the information and referral database.

However, realistically relatively little tacit staff knowledge will ever be captured in explicit form. Hence it is important where possible that sources of known expertise continue to be accessible. Mapping expertise and recording it in an online 'yellow pages' is one way of doing this.

The volunteer 'lifecycle' is one area that WIRE could gain substantial benefit from, if managed effectively. Although volunteers may move on to full time work elsewhere, they are still potentially a valuable lobby group for WIRE. Their word-of-mouth promotion helps raise WIRE's profile within the wider community, encourages other women to volunteer, and directly or indirectly assists in generating additional funding for the service. Instead of losing contact with former volunteers, maintaining their records on a 'contacts' database would help to sustain their interest and support for WIRE.

One of the most effective ways of getting the public to identify with a cause is to use human interest stories or real scenarios. Phone volunteers and staff in the course of their work constantly are exposed to such instances and have a wealth of insight and 'women's stories' they can recount. While for obvious privacy reasons no identifying details can be communicated, certain facts of a case can be extracted and translated into a typical case scenario, eg for a domestic violence situation, a child custody challenge, or a woman who was helped to procure venture capital to start her own small business. Such scenarios or success stories formally recorded have a powerful role to play in promoting WIRE and its services. Women hearing or reading about such cases relate them to their own experiences and are more likely to contact the service than where similar information is presented a series of 'dry facts'. This approach was successful in one case recounted below:

There was a project for outreach to women in rural and regional Victoria, and we trialed it through a [country] newspaper, to run a series of questions largely based on calls that phone workers had received. They identified the different kinds of scenarios, one domestic violence, one about returning to education, one about options, another one about relationships They were based on real call issues where there was the question and a WIRE phone worker's response for that. We saw that the value of doing that. Actually it did a number of things—it provided somebody with an idea; gave them the information as if it were their situation, but it was also indicative of who WIRE was and the sort of issues that WIRE dealt with. It also gave an opportunity in the case of the violence issues to actually write about things that don't achieve a lot of media coverage in rural and regional newspapers. So it gives you a chance to touch the taboos in a real way.

Encapsulating such scenarios into an accessible format for use in a variety of ways would be of considerable value for WIRE.

Governance

There are a variety of models of governance adopted by third sector organisations (see Lyons 2001, Chapter 16). In the *collective model*, organisations adopt a democratic, power-sharing structure where consensus decisions are taken by the entire membership—resulting in very slow decision making. With the increasing formalisation and professionalisation of organisations in this sector over the past decade, the *corporate management model* of governance (borrowed from the private sector) has become more common, and can be required by legislation as a prerequisite for government funding. Members elect a board (usually honorary) that runs the organisation on behalf of the membership, and is accountable for its performance. The board sets the broad goals and strategic direction and allows the chief executive/ manager to determine operational details relating to the implementation of strategies. The potential for conflict between board and staff is high—board members see the chief executive as there to implement board strategies, while staff look to the chief executive for direction and are frequently unclear of the actual role and activities of the board.

WIRE's Governance

WIRE has moved over the past few years from a form of collective governance model to more of a corporate governance model, involving an honorary board of elected representatives who set the longer term strategic direction for the organisation. Women on the Board come from diverse backgrounds and bring a wide range of skills and experience to WIRE. After an initial settling-in period when the Board was trying to establish the nature and parameters of its role, the board structure seems now to be working well, and has developed an effective strategic plan and planning process for the organisation. WIRE's Manager explained that the new governance model was not an extreme corporate model and that there had been 'a conscious effort to maintain the collaborative and participatory elements' that were an integral part of the WIRE culture. The manager oversees day-to-day operations and acts as the primary liaison between

the Board and staff, ensuring that Board strategies are effectively implemented. Each staff member has her own clearly defined area of responsibility, and has little or no direct involvement with the Board.

Associated KM Issues

One potential difficulty in the corporate governance model that keeps the Board 'at arm's length' from staff, is that it may not be sufficiently in touch with operational realities of the service, with consequent ramifications for strategic planning. A key KM challenge is to have in place effective mechanisms to ensure the necessary information and knowledge flows between the strategic and operational sides of the service. Regular staff meetings where the manager briefs staff on Board meetings, and gathers information from staff to report back to the Board are important. However, this mechanism may not in itself be sufficient, as illustrated in the following comment:

The Board has just asked if they could have more stories, more examples, instances of what the service is actually doing. It brings it to life.

Funding and Accountability

Funding and accountability issues are tightly intertwined in most organisations. For third sector organisations the situation is particularly complex, given the difficulties in securing financial support, the fickleness of ongoing funding streams and the mounting need to generate revenue from multiple sources. Increasingly, organisations in this sector need to be entrepreneurial and prepared 'to spend money to make money.' There has been a strong trend away from a welfare focus/ altruistic support to funding treated as a formal business transaction. With a corporate sponsorship, the business needs to demonstrate a 'fair exchange' in terms of kudos/ public relations benefit. For the past decade or two, receipt of government support has entailed formal business processes (eg contracting, outsourcing, tendering for offering community services) and heightened competition between organisations seeking support (Lewis 1996). More and more, government grants and other funding support require that recipient organisations demonstrate accountability—this is a major reason for third sector organisations introducing corporate governance models (Lyons 2001). With more focus on diversifying funding sources, multiple and often competing accountabilities can become difficult to reconcile (Taylor 1996). An organisation with multiple funding sources and constituencies needs to work through the nature of its accountability with each constituency and to prioritise them.

WIRE's Funding Sources and Accountabilities

WIRE's funding sources are still primarily government-based, accounting for around 70%-80% of its revenue. However, the funding climate has changed markedly over the past decade, as shown in the following staff comments:

For a long time we have been in survival mode—since 1993 when we got a big funding cut. It was a different climate resulting from [the implementation of] economic rationalism. We had to start to be more self-funding. That was a big change—it was never the case before. You got funding from the Department and you just did your job. A very different way of operating now. We had to learn a lot in a short time and we had to tender for the Women's Information Services for instance. If we hadn't won that tender I don't know where WIRE would be now. We couldn't have gone on.

We have funding through the Department of Human Services, the Office of Women's Policy, and some specific project-based funding, eg through the International Year of Volunteers. We tender every two years or every three years and it is like a normal everyday tendering contract. We need to present the budget every year to the Board. We get audited every year.

There is a concerted effort being made at WIRE to diversify funding sources so that the organisation is less affected by the vagaries and fluctuations in government funding. One major focus of the new WIRE Board has been devising a formal Financial Strategy.

They [the Board] are actually going out there and are making decisions about who they are going to target regarding sponsorship for WIRE. They are putting together a financial strategy when we have never had one. The Board are especially looking into corporate community partnerships, how WIRE can get business partnerships and that sort of thing, because government funding is just so up and down.

We have nearly two hundred members and we are working on extending the membership—because of our low resources we have to increase the membership base. We also get donations from various sources. If you are a counsellor or a medical practitioner and you want to be on our database you are asked to make a donation to WIRE. Twice a year we do things like appeal letters asking for money on certain projects.

Associated KM Issues

Diversifying funding sources and more stringent government accountability requirements necessitate effective mechanisms for managing accountability. There is a need for more sophisticated information/ knowledge management systems for identifying, recording and managing 'contacts' who are actual or prospective sources of financial or other support for WIRE. Such contacts would include WIRE members, donors, current or ex-volunteers, 'prospects', contact persons in relevant government departments/ agencies and the media, corporate sponsors, professionals providing private services to women, organisations to which referrals are made, and various other relevant individuals, groups and organisations identified through personal networks of WIRE 'people' (ie Board members, staff, volunteers, and selected clients/ users of the service). These contacts form the focus of marketing/ PR ventures, fundraising campaigns, submission writing for government grants and the like. A system for managing contacts would need to have an effective and seamless interface with internal financial systems and WIRE's community information and referral database. Various workflow and reporting mechanisms to meet different accountability requirements, and to track changing trends in sources of funding would need to be accommodated. Such developments would assist in WIRE's goals to raise its profile in the wider community; to increase its resource base through diversifying funding sources, with more reliance on the private sector; to ensure effective

communication and knowledge flows between key stakeholders; and to utilise ICTs more effectively to benefit the organisation.

Evaluating Performance

Various sources highlight the difficulties and complexities associated with evaluating performance in third sector/ community services organisations (eg D'Aunno 1992; Donovan and Jackson 1991; Lyons 2001; Patton 1999; Ross, Turner and Farrar 1991). Established private sector performance measures like market share or ROI are not relevant to this sector. Even performance indicators associated with the quality management and benchmarking tradition are difficult to apply to community organisations. In an insightful article on evaluating human services, Bullen (1996) demonstrates clearly how traditional management measures fail in human service organisations when *people* rather than *product* are the target of evaluation. Service statistics, facts and figures in human services require interpretation and mean little without effective complementary qualitative measures. Most community organisations have goals that involve highly intangible outcomes such as changing people's lives for the better. But how can such goals be measured for any particular service? The complexities of the human dynamics involved; the multiple views and very different—and often conflicting—perspectives of different 'stakeholders'; and the impossibility of proving that a change was caused by a particular intervention, are intractable problems. Bullen has derived a practical compromise that involves the triangulation of findings from several perspectives. He recommends a three-pronged approach to evaluating human services: (1) a process of collaborative reflection involving major stakeholders in a focus group-type situation, responding to questions about service effectiveness or interpreting the meaning of facts and figures pertaining to the service; (2) capturing the richness of human stories relating to client experiences with the service; and (3) statistical data on relevant aspects of service delivery. Funders and governing bodies need to grasp the realities of service provision—and those realities are not adequately communicated simply in the form of policy manuals or service statistics.

WIRE and Service Evaluation

WIRE is a classic case of a community organisation with lofty goals relating to human outcomes that are highly intangible and difficult to measure in an objective way. How can WIRE demonstrate that it has 'empowered women to make confident choices for themselves' or helped women to 'control their lives and destiny'? Earlier reference was made to the WIRE Board's request to be given stories and examples that illustrate the realities of what WIRE is actually doing and achieving. The Board has evidently discovered that service statistics without the richness of human stories are very limited in communicating performance achievements.

Associated KM Issues

WIRE has a well-developed community information and referral database that forms the technical foundation of its service delivery. Processes are in place for WIRE staff and volunteers to record basic details for each call by checking the relevant box from a predetermined list of options (eg what broad information category was involved; was the person calling for herself or for a third party; was a referral made). From this aggregated data, management reports can be generated, and certain broad trends identified. This is a valuable starting point for reporting performance outcomes. However, more qualitative data needs to be captured in order to communicate a richer picture of WIRE's achievements to its key stakeholders, and for use in its marketing and fundraising efforts, volunteer training programs and the like. WIRE could consider Bullen's suggestions for setting up focus groups comprising major stakeholders for collaborative reflection on performance outcomes, and in some way 'capturing' human interest stories and experiences.

Organisational Change

With the precarious nature of funding and related management issues, many third sector organisations are continually vulnerable to collapse (Billis 1996; Lyons 2001). This risk is greatest for those reliant on a single income source, particularly if that source is government. Adapting appropriately to changing circumstances in the organisational environment is imperative. A perennial threat to values-driven organisations is that they cling to old values and ways when the world about them has moved on.

Successful organisations effectively tailor their strategies to their organisational context and key factors in their operating environment. In the voluntary sector, Wilson (1996, pp. 91-92) highlights two significant factors—level of organisational appeal to funders, and level of competition from other voluntary and statutory organisations—that he links to appropriate strategies:

Organisations with less appeal to funders should establish a specialist niche when competition is high and innovate when it is low; organisations with more appeal to their funders can seek distinctive competence when competition is high, or add new services when competition is low. (p. 93)

External pressure to adopt corporate models and management practices has been the impetus for much of the organisational change that has occurred in this sector over the past decade or so. A corollary has been mounting competitiveness between agencies for limited available resources. High degrees of competition can undermine the potential benefits that third sector organisations can derive through collaboration and networking. Through collaborative strategies, organisations develop informal networks and alliances and the associated information dissemination and knowledge flows that create opportunities and assist organisational learning

and adaptation to environmental change. Insularity means effective isolation from information vital to strategic planning and an unnecessary duplication of effort amongst organisations within the sector.

Organisational change and strategic networks at WIRE

The major focus of organisational change at WIRE concerns the strategic role of the Board and the Manager. The Manager has an extensive personal network of important relationships that are central in developing and sustaining the profile of WIRE within the community. Key links are with funding and regulatory bodies like the Department of Human Services, and with a variety of women's service and other community sector organisations. The Manager regularly participates in a state government Women's Service forum where she has made valuable strategic links with officials with responsibility for women's services. A recent connection is with the Men's Referral Service, a similar type of organisation to WIRE. Active participation in such networks has been a key factor in WIRE's success in continuing to gain funding and public support.

WIRE staff and volunteers also interact with a wide range of specialist women's and community sector organisations that share common interests. Some organisations conduct training or information sessions for WIRE volunteers and staff on specific women's issues, eg CASA on sexual assault, the Women's Legal Service on family law and the Centre for Ethnicity, Culture and Health on working in culturally sensitive ways. Mutual information/ knowledge exchange and referral occur between WIRE and various related specialist services. Examples include Women's Health Victoria, the Royal Women's Hospital, Housing Services, Neighbourhood Houses, Domestic Violence/ Incest Resource Centre, Women's Legal Service, CASA, Reclaim the Night, and the Council of Adult Education Stepping Stones program for women. Interactions also occur with telephone counselling services such as Lifeline, CARE-RING or the Suicide Help Line. Some of these links develop through WIRE volunteers who work for multiple services, and through staff who have previously worked for such organisations. Opportunities for promotion of services flow from the development of relationships with similar groups, eg collaborating in promoting women's services on International Women's Day.

Some useful links for sharing information have been made through the Internet, eg the NSW government's Women's Gateway, the Queensland Women's Service site and similar overseas sites. This is explained in the following staff comment about sharing 'information sheets' [Note: These information sheets on frequently encountered women's issues are available online and as printed brochures].

The information sheets are a good example. We noticed that Women's Infolink had published information sheets. So we asked them if we could use them and adjust them a bit to the Victorian scene using other material. If there is something out there that is good we can refer women to it, or we can try to incorporate it here, but we don't want to double up either. They

were very happy for us to use it, because the same philosophy is there—you want to help women so you share.

An important area identified for potential collaboration concerns the use of technology— ensuring compatibility of systems between agencies and sharing the expense of implementing costly information systems.

We need to do it because the women's community is not big, so it is good to try to work together.

Staff appreciate the value of networking and some expressed regret that they did not have the opportunity to do more:

My role is really intense and full-on and I wish we had stronger links. It is one of the difficulties of the job that we all work quite hard and we don't have as much time as we'd like to get out and on the phone.

In interviews, staff had a tendency to dismiss or underrate the value of their own networks to WIRE, and to see strategic links as being the prerogative of the Manager or Board. There is considerable untapped potential in capitalising on strong informal links that are in place between staff and a wide range of related organisations and interest groups.

Associated KM Issues

A major KM challenge is how WIRE can capitalise on its valuable informal links and use them in strategic ways. Formalisation of alliances could offer considerable potential for mutual gain between collaborating organisations. The attendant risk is that formalisation threatens the spontaneous nature of these relationships and the opportunities they create for organisational learning. Ensuring staff have the opportunity to interact regularly with a wide range of external contacts and organisations will help to maximise strategic information and knowledge exchange and assist WIRE to effectively adapt to environmental change. While face-to-face interactions are preferred for knowledge exchange, technology has an important role to play in community networking in enhancing communication and facilitating interactions that would not otherwise occur.

Implications for Developing a KM Strategy at WIRE

This section summarises implications of issues raised in this paper for developing a KM strategy for WIRE, and explores how technology may be able to support WIRE's core human processes.

Knowledge creation and development is a fundamentally human and social process. In developing a knowledge management (KM) strategy for a community/ human service organisation such as WIRE, the 'people' dimension remains paramount. Technology can offer enormous potential in terms of supporting, enabling, facilitating or expediting human knowledge

processes, but it should not be considered the primary driver. Supporting technologies for organisational KM need to do more than facilitating the capture of data and dissemination of information. Certainly KM systems have data management, document management and information management capacities. However, above all else, knowledge technologies are associated with the building of communities— facilitating human interaction, collaboration and knowledge sharing (Alavi & Leidner 2001; Bhatt 2001; McDermott (1999; Skyrme 1999).

Internal Management Systems

A KM strategy for WIRE should address several interrelated aspects of internal management, as follows.

Contacts Management: A recurrent theme in the discussion of management issues confronting WIRE is the need for an effective and integrated means to identify, record and maintain up-to-date details of WIRE's 'contacts' drawn from a range of key stakeholder groups. These include current and former volunteers, members, donors, key contacts in government, business or media, actual or prospective sponsors, professionals and organisations to whom referrals are made, and relevant individuals, groups or organisations identified through the personal networks of WIRE 'people'. Effectively and selectively targeting contacts is a key success factor in marketing and fundraising campaigns, in ensuring an active support base for WIRE within the wider community, and in establishing information and knowledge flows that are a crucial to appropriate adaptation to environmental change. A contacts management system would need an effective interface with internal financial systems and WIRE's community information and referral database.

Financial Management: A major diversification of income sources and increase in proportion of funds generated from non-government sources, including corporate sponsorship will require more sophisticated financial management systems, including a capacity for electronic transactions.

Capturing and Recording Client Transaction Data: Current processes capture certain basic details of a client transaction, eg information category and whether or not a referral was made. Such statistics are useful for determining broad patterns and trends in usage of WIRE's information and referral services. Perhaps a greater range of quantitative data could be captured and/ or tools developed to 'mine' existing statistical data. But apart from this, there is substantial benefit to be gained in several areas by supplementing these statistics with qualitative data in the form of human interest stories or scenarios that can yield richer insights into the nature of WIRE's services and its achievements. Such stories would need to be stripped of any personal identifying details to protect client confidentiality, and perhaps aggregated to form a 'typical' case

description. These scenarios would be beneficial for publicity or fundraising, for attracting new clients who relate their personal situation to that presented in the case, in communicating with Board members the nature of WIRE's work, and for use in training programs for volunteers or new staff.

Training Materials Online: The volunteer-run phone service is the centre-piece of WIRE's services to women. However the high turnover of volunteers and staff-intensive nature of training new volunteers are besetting problems. An online resource of training materials including not only training notes, policy documents and the like, but also Internet links, case scenarios, 'real-audio' interviews, and simulations with interactive feedback could enhance training opportunities and reduce staffing requirements.

Administrative Documents Online: When staff or volunteers are interacting with a client over the phone, it is preferable that they are able to retrieve online administrative documents like a policy on handling a certain type of phone call, a procedure, a roster, or a form. Having to place the caller on hold while they locate a print document or folder is time-consuming, inefficient and may compromise client service.

Facilitating Knowledge Transfer between Shifts: For most shifts in the Phone Room, there is a need to transfer certain knowledge, situational or operational details from one shift to subsequent shifts. A note book called the 'Day Book' where phone workers hand-write messages for the next shift has long been used for this purpose. Dr Stefanie Kethers developed a prototype for an online version of the Day Book. However, implementation of the online version necessitates an upgrade of WIRE's technical infrastructure.

Making Particular Tacit Knowledge Explicit: There are several examples of WIRE staff drawing on their specialist knowledge or experience to prepare special 'information sheets' for clients and protocols for staff. A formalisation of this process and extension to many more staff, volunteers or contacts who have specialist expertise in particular relevant areas could significantly enhance current information service provision, especially if such information is incorporated into an online resource.

Facilitating Access to Tacit Knowledge: As very little tacit knowledge will ever be captured in explicit form, WIRE needs to find other ways to make sources of known expertise accessible when needed. The KM field has developed various 'knowledge mapping' techniques and 'yellow pages' expertise directories/ databases for this purpose. Online links can be made to a person's 'home-page' and email address. Some ex-staff and ex-volunteers with specialist expertise may be prepared to make themselves available for the occasional ongoing consultation in relation to their area of specialty. Consideration would need to be given to whether a separate expertise database

is required, or if this function could be served through interfacing with other systems such as the community information and referral database and a contacts management system.

Client Services

The InfoCom Community Information Database: Over the years, WIRE has developed a sophisticated community information and referral database that effectively services the information needs of most of its clients. The database resides on the local area network, and uses a controlled vocabulary from a local community information thesaurus. It comprises both local records and external records originating from other community organisations via the database supplier (Datascope Pty Ltd). The database is accessed primarily by staff and volunteers—and by some clients who use computers in the Women's Information Centre. However it is not available externally via the Internet. Major issues for consideration are whether or not WIRE continues to use this database or moves to a more Internet-compatible format with free-text searching via a search engine.

WIRE website: WIRE has had its own website since the mid-1990s, hosted by an external provider. It provides key information about WIRE—its mission, philosophy and services for women; volunteering; contact details, including provision for email queries; etc. It also has links to brief information blurbs on the most frequently consulted topics, eg separation and divorce, housing, finance and debt, children, domestic violence, counselling. Numbers of email inquiries have grown substantially over recent years, whilst numbers of phone callers have remained fairly constant. There are various possibilities for additional services to women, eg a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Column, or more links to relevant women's sites within Australia or overseas. However, any significant enhancement to WIRE's information services via the Internet, eg providing interactive searching of its database, online forms or discussion forums, requires a substantial upgrade in technical infrastructure, including the installation of an intranet. Funding constraints are a perennial issue here.

Conclusion

For WIRE and other community sector organisations operating with limited resources, tight budgets and heavily reliant on volunteer labour, investment in expensive proprietary KM systems is out of the question. However, their survival depends on their effective management of their knowledge resources and processes. Research to date at WIRE has explored current information and knowledge processes and potential KM strategies to enhance its information services to women. Further work remains to be done on translating these broad strategies into effective yet affordable system solutions that will help WIRE fulfil its vision of 'empowering women to make confident choices for themselves.'

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