

Knowledge Management Forum



Delivering knowledge excellence

Action Learning with the Henley KM Forum



‘The Action Learning Set worked very well. It was informal and open, and conducive to people sharing what’s most important to them.’

Jon Harman, Syngenta

‘Being able to take time out to consider the KM aspect of the job and talk to others in KM from other organisations was very useful. It was also very interesting to share others’ experiences and even though the organisations were very different, discovering that many of the challenges seemed to be very similar.’

Greg Mullett, MWH

Action Learning in the KM Forum

The Henley KM Forum launched a programme of action learning sets for members in 2010. Knowledge management professionals work in small groups supported by an experienced facilitator. Each person works on his/her own real work project, with an overall common theme providing a basis for collaboration through the process.

The benefits are:

- Improved delivery of key job-related priorities.
- Support in translating the generic thinking and guidance from past KM Forum research projects into practice in your organisational context.
- Increased networking and closer working relationships with other KM professionals.



What does Action Learning involve?

The action learning process includes the following stages:

- Groups of 6–8 people from different member organisations who are actively doing something in the topic area in their organisation commit to learning from each other in the area of practice over a period of about 8 months, supported by a skilled Henley facilitator.
- Five meetings where participants build on each other's learning and experience by sharing, mutually supporting and challenging each other's practice, in the light of the relevant KM Forum guidance.
- A briefing at the first meeting, by a member of the Henley KM Forum team on the available resources from any of the 40 past working group projects, which have relevant guidance in the topic area.
- Developing objectives each member wants to achieve before the next meeting.
- Reflecting on and sharing progress between meetings using the KM Forum wiki.
- Bidding for 'air time' to get help unblocking obstacles to progress and/or suggestions about how to improve implementation.

This process is well known for generating deep insights into how to do things better. The cross organisational peer support, grounded in good practice guidance, allows immediate practical issues to be addressed.

'Having the opportunity to step back from the "to do" list and think about what I was doing, how I was doing it, and being challenged on specific parts of the project. The feedback was so immediate and relevant, which meant I could translate it back into practice.'

Sarah Grimwood, MWH



KM Forum past projects are a valuable resource

'The model of Knowledge Stocks and Knowledge Flows with value increasing when knowledge circles merge more tightly was a light bulb moment for me. This linked a lot of initiatives that we were undertaking, for example knowledge communities. The format was understandable and came alive for me – bringing the issues to life and allowing me to see what I was aiming for, plus the stages required in between.'

Andy Wall, United Utilities

Since its inception in 2000, working groups of members of the KM Forum have explored aspects of knowledge management together. More than forty of these research projects have been completed and the guidance documents created from each project are a valuable resource for members to use in their own KM programmes. The reports and guidance documents from all the projects are available on the members' website.

These projects are an important feature of the Action Learning process at Henley. In the first meeting, a briefing is provided on past projects relevant to the theme of the set by a member of the KM Forum team.

‘The past projects provided a sound background to build the business case and frame the rationale and argument within the business. They also helped in setting up the communities, demonstrating good practice elsewhere.’

Alison Flower, BG Group

Action Learning Sets in 2010

The broad themes of the 2010 Action Learning Sets were:

Improving collaboration in organisations and **identifying valuable knowledge**

The projects that were undertaken by members of the sets included:

- Community enablement and operation using social networking and IT.
- Building communities of practice from scratch.
- Improving knowledge sharing across different offices, including motivating people to be involved in knowledge sharing and use online tools.
- Collaboration across government departments, including learning lessons and translating these across other activities.
- Ensuring knowledge flows between communities of practice, not just within them.
- Capturing and disseminating knowledge around separate geographical business units.
- Driving more effective knowledge flows through the organisation.
- Personal development as a knowledge manager.

‘We worked well as a group. You do need a facilitator to maintain the process and focus when necessary: this worked well. People blogging on the wiki helped those who couldn’t attend a meeting to keep in touch with discussions and action plans. It was also useful to exchange ideas and be challenged by others in different organisations.’

Susan Frost, MOD

‘The first session’s summary of past projects made it clear what the focus of the group should be. It was helpful in highlighting particular aspects that would be useful to us.’

Jim Downie, Unisys

‘The process was useful in teasing out people’s issues and seeing them from different points of view. I hence tackled issues differently. Getting together physically was key to the overall value.’

Anne Fraser, DFID

‘Meetings worked well with everyone being open and informal: ideas therefore flowed freely. It was helpful to benchmark your own ideas and stage of personal and organisational development, and the project material was useful in providing general guidance, information, and good practice in this area.’

Martin Fowkes, Local Government Ombudsman

Action Learning Sets in 2011

The broad themes of the 2011 Action Learning Sets were:

Improving collaboration in organisations and **embedding KM into organisations**

The projects that were undertaken by members of the sets included:

- Developing a new KM strategy to reflect a more centralised approach.
- Knowledge retention in a radically changed Government Department, including optimum use of Microsoft Sharepoint.
- KM initiatives flowing from a new operational plan for the organisation.
- Aligning communities of practice with a changed organisational structure.
- Planning the best approach to embed KM with a new team and significant budget and executive support.
- Defining a strategic approach to KM in the UK in a multinational organisation.
- Improving maturity of KM – creating a ‘pull’ approach.



- Developing a new KM approach to support a new company strategy.
- Re-defining KM services with a new leadership team to support a longer term growth strategy.
- Clearly defining the nature of 'information assets' and developing a demand-led approach to KM.
- Improved involvement of outsourced consultancies with in-house KM initiatives.
- Setting up a central dedicated centre of excellence to improve KM maturity.
- How advances in web technology can influence and enhance collaboration and KM through the provision of a rich and more interactive media environment.
- Identifying a way to efficiently transfer knowledge from engineers in France to their UK counterparts.
- Identifying a means of storing knowledge for 100 years or more – including the right systems and culture.
- Introducing a cost-effective IT solution to support KM in the business.

'There was the opportunity to get other colleagues involved, giving them first-hand experience of the process. This proved many times more effective than was expected, and also benefited other Action Learning Set members as well.'

Andy Wall, United Utilities

'What was immediately beneficial was the openness with other members of the group, and the open and encouraging environment – there was no baggage. I became very comfortable with the Action Learning Set discussions to identify issues. By the end we had got to know each other very well, and we all benefited.'

Jim Downie, Unisys

Action learning in practice at: MWH

MWH is a global environmental engineering company specialising in providing innovative, sustainable solutions to some of the most challenging wet infrastructure projects in communities around the world.



Sarah Grimwood is a Chartered Civil Engineer with 20 years experience in the water and wastewater industry. For the last 12 years Sarah has worked on a variety of tasks relating to Knowledge Management.

Sarah's story

Following on from a significant business reorganisation, I wanted to ensure that our Knowledge Communities (most of which have now been operating successfully for about 10 years) are welcomed by the new business and continue to be able to contribute to the success of MWH.

I needed to ensure that the Knowledge Communities complemented rather than duplicated the activities of the newly established technical disciplines and that they had a clear remit going forwards.

In the process of working on this in the Henley KM Forum action learning set, I learned that in order to promote KM to the new senior management team (who were questioning the value of KM to the business), I need to promote myself and my vision for our Knowledge Communities. Over the course of the year I have raised my profile and, with advice from the ALS, I have obtained much greater support and understanding for KM in MWH.

I am now working closely with our Head of Engineering who directs our technical discipline teams. We are currently organising a workshop to be held in January (with input and suggestions from ALS colleagues) on the role of our Knowledge Communities going forwards. This workshop signifies an acknowledgement that Knowledge Communities do still have a vital role to play in the business.

Participating in the ALS has given me the opportunity to step back and think about how to address the key issues. By using my ALS colleagues as a sounding board I have been able to reflect on what I was trying to achieve and gain confidence in the techniques I was using.

Action learning in practice at: EDF Energy Nuclear New Build

EDF Energy is committed to its programme of producing safe, affordable and reliable low-carbon electricity. The Nuclear New Build business unit helps to deliver this programme in the UK.



David Ogle is a Chartered Engineer and Scientist with over 10 years' experience in the Nuclear Industry. In addition to his role as Nuclear Technology Manager, he has also taken responsibility for establishing the organisation's Knowledge Management Strategy.

David's story

I am tasked with establishing a KM strategy for EDF Energy NNB. The KM strategy needs to address two key challenges:

- 1 How do we in the UK acquire the knowledge of our French station designers, built up over decades in France, in the time it takes to build a station in the UK?
- 2 How do we as nuclear plant operators manage knowledge over the lifetime of our stations (>100 years)?

This matters to my organisation because it is essential to support nuclear safety, for our project to be delivered and to satisfy regulatory requirements.

In the process of working on this with the Henley KM Forum action learning set, I learned that the challenges we faced and found difficult were genuinely difficult. Other organisations faced very similar challenges, albeit in differing contexts.

Delivering a KM strategy is a key milestone for my organisation. Because year one of the project was focussed on developing a strategy, the tangible business benefits will materialise later as the strategy is deployed.

However, the year one work has already been sufficient to win the respect of our regulators.

The action learning process was helpful in a number of ways:

- The learning captured in the past KM Forum projects is one of the primary sources of organisational experience that we are using to support our strategy;
- The ability to benchmark our activities against past KM Forum Projects and against other organisations through ALS has been vital in helping us win internal support for our proposed strategy, for securing funding to support our project and to provide confidence to our regulators that we are on the right track;
- Discussing strategic decisions and practical solutions within the ALS allowed us to seek independent feedback of our own thinking and gave us the opportunity to modify our strategy before sharing it with key stakeholders.

‘The networking was valuable and I gained a lot from working with people from other organisations. We were able to share ideas in a safe environment.’

Susan Chan, Cabinet Office

Leading the way through knowledgeable practice



Mike Palmer

Mike Palmer believes that skilled facilitation, executive coaching, and individual exploration enable people and organisations to leverage their skills and ultimately fulfil their professional and life's purpose. He now shares this passion to distil 35 years' extensive experience in corporate, academic and his own life experiences for the benefit of others.

Having been part of the Henley KM Forum for the past five years, he believes Action Learning is a highly motivating and challenging way for senior people to identify and work on key organisational projects, with the support of peers from other sectors and job roles.



Ken Bull

In his role as a Learning and Development Specialist, Ken has worked across a wide range of Private and Public sector organisations. As a learning set facilitator, he became highly enthusiastic about the concept of Action having originally explored it as part of a PhD at the Revans Centre in Salford. 'The concept of recognising, sharing and building on the experiences of 'set members' in order to take action back in the work environment places a different emphasis on personal development and builds on the real world practical application of learning with and through others' says Ken.



Henley Business School

Henley Business School at the University of Reading is a leading international business school based in the UK and operating around the world. Henley was founded over 60 years ago – by business for business – and today is one of a small group of business schools to hold triple accredited status from the major UK, European and US awarding bodies. Henley's management and leadership development programmes are highly pragmatic, designed so that the learning can be readily applied back in the working environment.

Henley Knowledge Management Forum

Henley Knowledge Management Forum was founded in 2000 and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it attracts leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To find out more about the Henley Knowledge Management Forum visit

www.henley.ac.uk/kmforum

or contact kmadmin@henley.ac.uk

Action Learning with the Henley KM Forum

i To discuss the benefits of membership
for your organisation please contact
Marina Hart for an information pack:

Marina Hart

kmadmin@henley.ac.uk

+44 (0) 1491 418 723

www.henley.ac.uk/kmforum