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Transforming Off-line Commitment to Online Engagement: Year one in Creating a Community of Practice on a Social Media Platform

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In the spring of 2011, Treasury Board Secretariat's Official Languages Centre of Excellence (OLCE) embarked on an experiment using a new social media platform with a group of official languages specialists in the federal government. This article recounts the experience and some of the lessons learned at the one year mark from the perspective of the initiators of the project.

Getting Started

As a starting point, it is useful to understand what propelled us to consider the use of an online platform. In essence, there were two main drivers:

First, there was the Centre's need to consult official languages specialists in a large number of federal institutions while a new set of policies was being prepared. Reviewing Treasury Board policies is a cyclical exercise that takes place about every five years. Each review provides an opportunity to consult with public servants and learn about their experiences with current policies in an effort to improve them. Gathering feedback from public servants can be accomplished in many ways. Face-to-face meetings and written comments are most typical. However, our objective was to use this consultation process as a way to put into practice a new, more enabling relationship between the OLCE and functional specialists so that their comments on the new policies would become building blocks for improved information sharing. That is why, in addition to organizing traditional face-to-face meetings, we were looking for a tool that would allow for feedback not just to be exchanged between OLCE and each individual institution but rather for the feedback to be shared and visible across the entire community.

Driver number two was more complex. Three years ago, the long-standing business model of the Centre had shifted. Instead of providing specific, one-on-one advice to official languages specialists in institutions, our stakeholders had been asked to take on greater responsibility. Given this context, our hope was that the online consultation exercise could become the stepping-stone for creating an online community of practice to support the new enabling approach. We also hoped that online collaboration would foster the exchange of knowledge and best practices among the organizations themselves. In other words, we wanted to be in a virtual room with our stakeholder colleagues.

Official languages specialists are – what is called in government parlance – a "functional community", i.e., "**employees who share common work purposes, functions and professional interests**". Functional communities exist in areas like communications, human resources, information management, procurement, and many more. The official languages functional community is a comparatively small group comprising of nearly 350 people but spans about 200 institutions that include departments, Crown corporations and privatized organizations. The role of these OL specialists is to advise employees and managers all the way up to the deputy minister on issues such as the institution's obligation to serve the public in both official languages and the linguistic designation of positions.

Among the conditions in our favour was the fact that this is a passionate community. If you were ever to attend one of their face-to-face meetings, you would immediately sense their energy and dedication. Ensuring respect for bilingualism in the public service is an "affaire de cœur" for them. Being passionate offline, we thought,

augured well for being active online.

The challenges we faced were two-fold: The first was technological. Traditional e-mail distribution lists cannot sustain an ongoing exchange between 200 organizations. We needed a discussion space that would provide its users with a variety of notification and participation options. We also needed a web platform that would be accessible not just to federal departments (which is the case with tools such as GCPedia and GCForums) but also to Crown corporations and other organizations. It was our good fortune that we found an exceptional partner for our endeavour in **Policy Horizons Canada**, whose mandate includes experimentation with new and innovative policy tools, framed within partnership agreements that include capture and sharing of lessons learned. Not only did Horizons have a nimble, ready-to-use, bilingual and broadly accessible Web 2.0 application, they also had the critical social media savvy to guide newbies like us around the pitfalls of online community engagement.

These pitfalls were related to the cultural challenge that we faced. For all the passion among official languages specialists, they had been going through a period of adjustment as the Centre had adopted its new enabling approach. With the introduction of a new online platform there was a risk that it might, at least initially, be perceived as adding to rather than easing the workload of OL specialists, especially as many of them work in smaller organizations where OL expertise often resides in only one person.

The other risk was with our own OLCE team. They wondered what would happen if anyone in the functional community posted sensitive questions or documents: Who would be answering these questions? How quickly and with what authority would OLCE be expected to react? What if incomplete answers were posted by members of the community? How many resources would it take for us to monitor and interact with the community in this new online space?

These were valid concerns, both in the community and in our own team – and the truth is that none of us really knew the answers. The policy consultation component of our project had a clearly defined purpose and time limit. This, we were quite certain, could be achieved using the platform. But for the long-term objective of creating an online community of practice, we had to be open to the possibility that our functional community would see a Web 2.0 system as an additional burden and that in our Centre it would consume too much of our already scarce resources. We decided to rely on the expert advice from our partners at Policy Horizons Canada and prepare for the roll-out of the platform as diligently as possible.

The Roll-out Phase

Our primary concern was to ensure that there would be ample communication with official languages specialists around the launch of the platform and that intensive training opportunities could be offered. Hands-on training sessions in a computer lab allowed us to accomplish that goal and train nearly 100 users in groups of ten so that they would be ready to play the role of early adopters of the electronic platform and spread the good news within their organizations and among their colleagues.

We also needed an open dialogue with other stakeholders which play a key role in official languages such as the Public Service Commission, Justice Canada, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages and Canadian Heritage. This was important so that our initiative would not surprise those on whom it risked having an impact and, as a result, lead to questions or concerns that could harm the initiative. Full and transparent communication with these key stakeholders on the objectives of the platform was very important.

In addition, we had to be in a position where we could dedicate sufficient resources to the project for at least six to nine months in order to create and maintain momentum. Principally, this meant having a person whose role became dubbed the "G.O.". The French term G.O. means "gentil organisateur" but it refers to the person hired by a hotel or holiday agency like Club Med who will coax people into doing work-outs and social activities: "Don't be shy; this isn't going to hurt!" Amusing, you might think, but the success of a project like this does also depend on whether you are able to set the right tone for the interaction on the platform. More than a formal set of do's and don'ts, having such a G.O. coach allowed us to establish expected courtesy and practices that helped bring the virtual community alive and let it flourish. Having a G.O. also ensured that we were able to react quickly. Especially in the beginning, this meant acknowledging the first posts of community members. Nothing is more discouraging than for someone to send a first message into an unknown space and be greeted by radio silence. In short, we needed to show an attitude of openness and collaboration with the community and demonstrate that we are living this new adventure side by side with them.

The G.O., of course, needed to be supported by the rest of the team at the Centre – which meant planning for and appreciating the amount of time that such a role requires. Policy Horizons Canada had impressed upon us that the investment in terms of person-hours by the platform operator would, at least initially, be almost equal to the combined amount of time spent by each user. In other words, the Centre needed to invest one person-hour of work (including planning, training, writing, etc.) to get 60 people to take one minute each to contribute something.

Another practice we established was for the team that is responsible for dealing with requests for information or policy interpretation from federal institutions to meet every Friday to decide whether or not issues raised in the online discussions required

any kind of intervention. We had determined that intervention would be needed when it appeared that an issue had broad implications and that no one seemed to have offered a solution that responded to the question raised. Other cases were those where members disagreed on an interpretation, where inaccurate or incomplete information demanded clarification, or where we wanted to stimulate participation in discussions of general interest. This type of monitoring also helped analysts at the OLCE quickly detect emerging issues and devise a strategy on how to deal with them.

The First Year

Within a few weeks of launching the platform we had a critical mass of members. They engaged with the policy review exercise but also quickly started asking their own questions and posting answers. After one year, the numbers tell their own story. We have nearly 200 users, representing 80 institutions. Within a period of 13 months, nearly 100 online discussions have taken place. A good indication that the community is really taking ownership of their online community is that 86% of discussions are created by people in federal institutions while only 14% are generated by us at the central agency.

Studies on participation in online social networks indicate that in most online communities, up to 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, and the top one percent of users represents up to 90% of postings.[1] Compared against this, our community appeared to be well engaged: Statistics for the first twelve months show that most members (52%) participated in at least one discussion. The top one percent of our users accounted for less than 12% of all postings while the top 10% accounted for half (52%) of all postings. Considering that many members joined later during the year and therefore had fewer opportunities to participate, we found this quite encouraging.

To illustrate our daily reality with the Web 2.0 platform, let us provide two brief examples. In the first one, an

1. **Participation Inequality**

3

official languages specialist faced the question in their institution whether a deputy head could oblige an employee to be assessed in their second language without the employee actually changing positions. So, they posted a question on the platform. Many issues that official languages specialists are faced with are both complex and applied, and an easy answer may not always be found in a policy instruments. Three hours after the question was posted, several community members had shared their corporate memory on the matter, which helped guide the person who posted the question in their particular circumstances. The community, in other words, had found its own answer without the Centre being involved, and the information is now available for anybody who might have a similar question in the future.

Some Feedback from Users:

- *"This collaborative site is very worthwhile and I'd like to be more involved."*

- *"Thank you very much! Merci beaucoup Annie. I really appreciate the context you provided with the answer."*

- *"Thank you all for your prompt responses. I really appreciate it."*

- *"I am glad to join the OL community at the time this site is put in place. I feel that this tool will be extremely precious and will allow me to learn, share and exchange on all aspects of official languages, which is hard to do in my Department because the OL team is composed of 1 1/3 people maybe? It is surely the case for most of you… I see here a good tool to help each other and to create solidarity among the OL community."*

- *"Thank you for your response Isabelle. It's a good solution that I will offer to my executive."*

- *"Thank you for providing us with this platform."*

In the second example, the Executive Director of our Centre of Excellence posted a message, thanking

members of the online community for their precious contribution to the review of our policy suite. He used the opportunity to launch a small survey which would help us determine the tools that the community felt would be most useful for the implementation of the new policy suite. Within a week, the message had been viewed 200 times and we had received 31 responses to our mini-survey. Armed with such key feedback, it became much easier to plan and deliver the kinds of tools the community needed.

An encouraging sign has been the fact that, as the project has matured, we have been invited on a number of occasions to share our experiences with others in the federal public service considering similar initiatives.

Discussion

While still officially a pilot project, our Web 2.0 platform has become part of how we do business. Both the technological and cultural challenges have, for the most part, been mastered. Our first year shows that, with the help of experienced partners, it is possible to successfully embark upon the adventure of an online community of practice. Now that many have seen the advantages of online collaboration, few would want to go back to the old ways.

However, changing the culture of a community (including our own culture at the Centre) is a long-term process. While even the most experienced members of the community see the usefulness of the new platform, it is especially those who work alone in small agencies or in remote areas for whom it has become a lifeline. For us at the Centre, the Web 2.0 platform allows us to keep our finger on the pulse of the community much more directly than in the past. The realities and challenges of our colleagues across a broad range of federal institutions are more clearly evident, which helps us deal with real rather than perceived challenges among them.

Beyond the immediate confines of our project, some broader links with the use of technology in government can be made. In 2011, the Global Agenda Council on the Future of Government of the World Economic Forum (WEF)[2] published a report that is of particular relevance in our context. The report considered how new networks and technologies can be leveraged to transform government capacity. It argues that "leading governments are transforming themselves into flatter, agile, streamlined and tech-enabled (FAST) organizations." While the Council's vision is a comprehensive one for entire government structures, it is useful to consider how relatively small projects such as a Web 2.0 platform support the direction that WEF is recommending.

With regard to flatter government, the report proposes that the "flattening of the decision-making process can be accomplished ... horizontally by building collaboration within and across government departments, agencies and ministries." The OL community of practice has done just that as it brings together, for the first time, all federal institutions under one virtual roof and creates a space where functional specialists can interact in a space that puts a premium on task-orientation and one that is less focused on hierarchy.

With regard to more agile government, the report proposes that "governments must be able to 'de-organize' themselves when specific structures and processes are no longer needed. This requires an agile workforce made up primarily of highly skilled knowledge workers with broad problem-solving capabilities and armed with real time data and business intelligence – working in teams and networks ...." The OL community of practice is an example of such de-organization and subsequent re-organization. The hand-holding role of the central agency shifted towards one that seeks to leverage the collective capacity of the community. This shift was facilitated by the electronic platform as members of the community of practice realized how much – and in many ways how much better and how much more immediately – they were able to accomplish their work as part of a large networked team.

With regard to a more tech-enabled government with a tech-savvy workforce, the report suggests that it is FAST (flatter, agile, streamlined and tech-enabled) governments that "are more likely to attract and retain a new breed of civil servant who thrives on problem-solving, results and innovation." After one year, it is too soon to say whether the availability of a social media platform has played any role in attracting or retaining talented, young public servants in the area of official languages. But perhaps the focus on the young and new breed of civil servants is limiting. Based on what we have seen in our project, public servants with a variety of years of experience thrive on problem-solving, results and innovation. When given the right tools, personal and collective initiative manifests itself, regardless of age. On our platform, we see seasoned specialists able to take pride in sharing their knowledge, while newcomers can combine their desire for innovation with the opportunity to tap into the expertise of their experienced colleagues in the community.

Finally, the WEF report offers words of caution, pointing out that technology is not a panacea and emphasizing that technological change needs to be accompanied by a change in work culture, which is characterized by enabling the dialogue and supporting cooperation: "A new kind of expert culture is needed, where working together is – internally and externally – the password to progress. Civil servants need training and encouragement to acquire these skills ... For the expert culture, it also translates into letting go of old ways of functioning as the way work is done in the administration changes when new more interactive ways of preparing policies are brought in." In our initiative, interactive technology is certainly proving to be a powerful means of creating much more frequent contact within a community. Still, without the regular face-to-face (and truly interactive) meetings that our community enjoys, it is doubtful that we could have achieved the culture of collaboration online that we now see.

As we consider our one-year experience with the official languages community of practice, the WEF report has particular resonance for us. If anything, our Web 2.0 project has taught us that there is tremendous but often hidden expertise that can be leveraged from the network while the expert culture at the Centre undergoes a refreshing challenge in its traditional ways of functioning. Ultimately, our most important ingredient for success has been the members of the community themselves. Their passion and effervescence in the real, offline world has found its way into a new medium. We are proud to have played a role in making that medium available, but in the end it is the community's engagement that continues to bring it alive.