

An Exploratory Study of the Knowledge Needs of Student Groups

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Introduction

Like any organization, student groups need knowledge and information to function and to fulfill their mandate. Knowledge management involves capturing and organizing the information contained within organizations and preserving it for future use (Kong, 2007; Lemieux & Dalkir, 2006). For student groups, having the knowledge and experience of past and present members stored for the use of future members enables good practices to continue and prevents the unnecessary duplication of knowledge or 'reinventing the wheel.' Having a recorded history or "common memory" also helps create stronger ties between members and helps focus the goals of the organization (Nowe, Wilson, & Maceviciute, 2008). One part of implementing KM is conducting a knowledge audit, which is used to document what knowledge an organization possesses as well as mapping how knowledge flows in and out of the organization and identifying any knowledge gaps or sinks (Liebowitz et al., 2000). A knowledge audit of a student group was conducted in order to discover the needs and issues that exist within student groups and to suggest possible KM solutions to meet those needs.

Research Question

What types of knowledge do student groups need to function and what, if any, measures are in place to capture this knowledge for future use? Does knowledge flow in and out of the organization or are there sinks or gaps in communication? What will ease the transition from a junior to senior position? What will make their tasks easier to accomplish so they are not constantly starting from scratch?

Participants

A student organization at the University of Alberta was chosen. The group consists of graduate students from a two-year graduate program and runs on a mentorship model where members serve a two-year term starting as juniors then moving to a senior position in their second term. It is not uncommon for the junior positions to remain vacant, making the need for knowledge capturing critical. The group plans and hosts a student-run conference each year and therefore has a variety of knowledge needs.

Acknowledgements

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Methodology

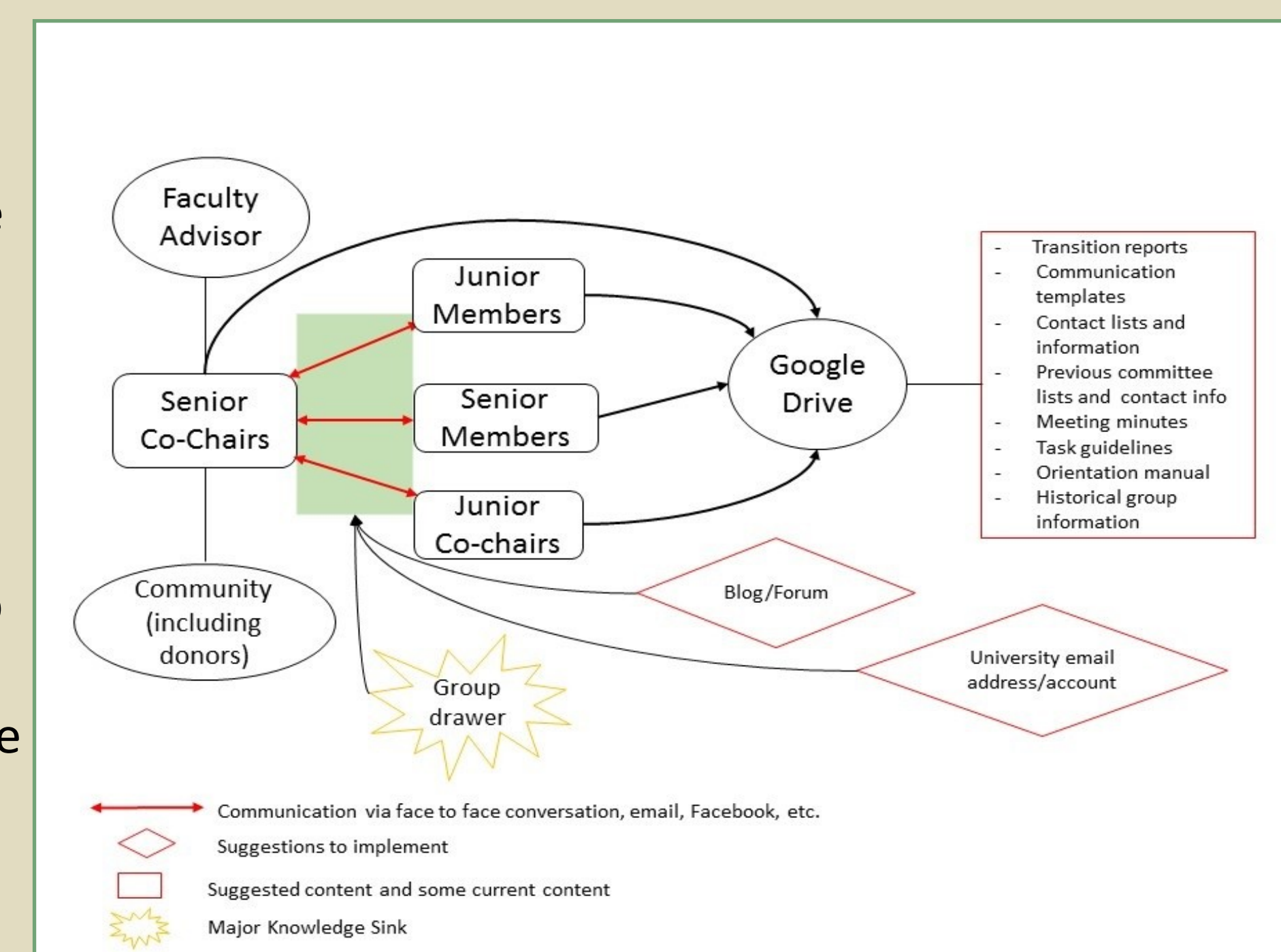
To conduct the knowledge audit, eight of the eleven group members were interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty-five and forty-five minutes. Interview questions were adapted from the knowledge audit procedure laid out by Liebowitz et al (2000) and tailored to the specific characteristics of the student group. Due to time constraints all interviews were conducted in groups except for one. Interviews were conducted with one senior co-chair (due to illness), both junior co-chairs and five of the six other senior members. One researcher conducted the interview while the other took extensive notes in order to avoid the necessity of full transcriptions of the interviews, which were also audio recorded. The interviews were analyzed by both researchers for common themes and pertinent quotes were taken from the notes or audio as needed. The flow of knowledge was mapped to create a visual framework with emphasis on any sinks or gaps in the flow.

Knowledge Needs

Each member's knowledge needs are tied into the position they fill within the group, such as the catering coordinator needing knowledge of catering companies and the number of attendees for the conference. The senior co-chairs also need more general knowledge of event planning, such as how to find keynote speakers and schedule the conference, as well as how to run the group itself. Although only two junior members were interviewed, they seem to need more general knowledge of how the group is run plus whatever knowledge their seniors pass on to prepare them for becoming seniors themselves. Group members rely on each other for much of their knowledge sources as well as any sources their seniors may have passed on to them. Outside sources are consulted only for specific needs, such as a catering company or poster printing. The group has a faculty advisor who is mainly consulted for operational issues or feedback on group decisions.

KM Framework

The group uses Google Drive to store and share knowledge as well as a group Gmail account. The group also has a drawer which is largely unorganized and rarely used. A Facebook group is used to organize meeting times and share some information.



KM Issues

Some communication barriers between juniors and seniors exist partly due to a lack of formalization in the structure of the group. The culture of the group changes as the juniors become seniors, particularly if the members are friends outside of the group. The current group has a fairly open culture of communication but with only three of eight junior positions currently filled the culture may change with many new members stepping straight into senior positions next year. The mentorship model also depends on the culture since there is no formalized structure of what is communicated to juniors and when. Most information is exchanged at face-to-face meetings forcing members unable to attend to rely on meeting minutes. Minutes and other documents are stored in a shared Google Drive but there is no formal organization or requirements for what is to be stored and where. Knowledge from three previous years is also stored on the Drive but there is little organization and few current members are aware of what knowledge is contained in those folders. With no formal procedures for capturing knowledge it is up to each member to record and store what they think would be useful for and it is likely that a great deal of knowledge is lost as members leave the group.

Recommendations

The group could register for a university ID which would give access to both Gmail and Google Drive through the university rather than using an outside service. This also includes access to university web space which would solve some issues with the group website that is currently hosted by a third party service and paid for by the group. Group members may also benefit from a blog or forum that can be used to disseminate information and hold discussions outside of meeting times and would capture any knowledge posted. The Facebook group could be expanded to meet this need or an outside service like Reddit could be used. The group could also create a Google Group which members would have automatic access to through their university IDs instead of registering for accounts through an outside service. Most importantly the group should decide on a formal method of capturing knowledge such as each senior creating a transition report for the incoming senior that explains in detail what steps were taken and sources consulted for each of their tasks. Templates for documents such as emails and posters should also be created and stored on the drive. An orientation manual would be beneficial for new members especially for years with few juniors.

Future Work

This study has shown that student groups share many characteristics with NPOs and can benefit greatly from the introduction of KM tools and solutions to help capture and organize the vast amounts of knowledge contained within each organization. However these findings are limited by the small sample and future study examining other types of student groups and groups of varying size would be beneficial.