

Facilitation Skills for Information Specialists: New Talents, New Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

The British Columbia Securities Commission is a regulatory agency located in Vancouver, British Columbia. Responsible for regulating the BC capital markets and protecting investors, the Commission employs several MLIS graduates in various positions including two Information Specialists who provide research, current awareness and knowledge management services, a Web Content Strategist who sets direction for the Commission's three external websites and extensive intranet, and a Knowledge Management Services Manager who oversees these and other functions.

The knowledge management professionals at the BC Securities Commission have long used informal facilitation as part of our knowledge management, research, and web content development practice. In November 2006, we attended professional facilitation training to build our skills and knowledge and to take our practice to a more advanced level. Since then, we have used formal group facilitation to tackle knowledge management problems within the organization as well as to refine and improve our services. This paper provides an overview of the most useful facilitation skills for information workers provided through concrete examples drawn from the BCSC experience. These examples provide a source of ideas you can draw on to incorporate group facilitation into your own knowledge management practice or to build on your existing facilitation techniques. Facilitation skills complement and build on the existing roles of knowledge managers, librarians, and web specialists.

A skilled facilitator can access the tacit knowledge of a group, allowing them to creatively brainstorm ideas, analyze problems, rank and group complex forms of information, and make decisions. Information specialists are a natural fit for this role since we recognize the need for objective organized inquiry, understand complex problems, and have a natural talent for bringing order to chaos.

We have found facilitation to be an extremely useful tool for knowledge management, and have applied the facilitation techniques we learned within our knowledge management team and throughout the larger organization. Since receiving the training, we have successfully used our skills on a number of knowledge management projects.

FACILITATION FOR COLLECTIONS DEVELOPMENT

Like many special libraries, we have contracts with numerous information providers, which provide us with access to various types of electronic information. Over time, the scope of content in these databases has changed: our news provider began offering business information, our EDGAR provider began offering SEDAR access, and our legal information provider began offering news services. Sources were added and deleted from many of our aggregated services, resulting in both duplication and omission. As each contract came up for renewal, we would do a general assessment of whether the source met our needs and whether it had enough value to justify the cost, but we found that since our contracts are not all renewable at the same time each year, we weren't able to assess the whole picture.

Using the techniques learned in our facilitation training, I designed and facilitated a structured brainstorming session with our collections decision-makers. Together we worked to draw up a list of the types of information we required in order to do our job. First we identified the major areas of information we rely on (in this case legal information, business information, news). We spent approximately half an hour on each topic, throwing out as many ideas as we could and writing them on flip charts. See table 1 for examples of the types of information we identified. Once we had identified our essential content and "bonus" content we could begin the process of matching what we wanted to the current packages available in the market.

TABLE 1. Examples of information needs identified during the collections brainstorming exercise

Legal Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canadian cases US cases International cases Court registry filings Commentary Tables of concordance for Canadian securities law
Business information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public company filings (SEDAR / EDGAR) Incorporation records Bankruptcy records Market and trading information Corporate press releases
News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canadian major press Local press Wall Street Journal

Financial Times Investment news Investigative journalism
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Using the results we gathered through this process, we have embarked on a subscription audit. In the first year we did a full review of our news sources, which resulted in switching providers for US/UK news at a cost savings. At the same time we were able to review our news publishing process in order to streamline it and ensure that it worked with our new portfolio of sources. This coming year we will be looking at our legal information sources to develop an effective portfolio of subscriptions that minimizes costly duplication.

WEBSITE PLANNING

Laura Matheson, MLIS is the Web Content Strategist at the Commission. She attended the facilitation skills training in 2006, and has put her skills to use by facilitating focus groups and user tests to improve our websites.

Recently we identified a need for an expanded section of the website that would hold the decisions and orders issued by the BCSC. In order to develop a design that met users' needs, Laura planned a series of meetings with internal users to identify the requirements for the new design.

Over the course of two weeks, Laura held eight sessions with between one and three participants at each meeting. Laura presented these users with a series of questions and an exercise. Each group was given a series of flash cards, which contained various types of information relating to our decisions and orders, and asked to sort the information into categories that made sense to them. This process helped her to increase her understanding of how different types of users approach and understand the information and to propose a design that met their needs.

When asked what facilitation skills she relied on to make this exercise successful, she stressed the importance of a solid introduction at the beginning of each session, focusing on purpose, process, profit, and roles (a facilitation technique known as PPPR). Most importantly, it was essential to lay out clear expectations with the group at the outset of each session. This helped reduce participant anxiety, which began to rise when the attendees realized they would be completing an exercise. By assuring each participant that there was no "right answer" for what she was asking, she was able to diffuse their concerns and allow them to focus on the task at hand. Laura also emphasized the value of the profit statement – of explaining to participants why the work they were doing was important and what benefits it would hold to the organization and the individuals in the room. In this case, a clear understanding of user needs and expectations would lead to a better product – a product that the participants frequently use to find decisions and orders. Therefore, improvements to that section of the website would simplify one aspect of the participants' work life. Clearly stating this profit at the outset helped reduce the natural skepticism that many participants felt, and encourage their participation.

The sessions were successful in developing a clear understanding of user needs, which led to a clear set of project requirements. In addition to achieving their stated goal, the sessions Laura facilitated also helped to create support for an unpopular aspect of the project that required business process improvements. Participants felt included in the planning and decision-making, which led to buy-in for the other work that was required on the project. An important facilitation theory is that people will own what they helped create, and this has certainly held true in this case.

INTELLIGENCE GATHERING

One of our organization's strategic objectives is to enhance our ability to gather and analyze information that will give us solid intelligence we can use to detect and disrupt investment fraud in our markets early. While we have a well-staffed and talented enforcement division, which includes an intelligence and case assessment department, one of the challenges for the Commission was identifying information held by other departments that could contribute to the intelligence process. Employees in these areas have frequent contact with investment firms, issuing companies and investors. They are likely to come across information that would be of interest to the intelligence analysts in the course of their work. As with any organization, silos of information had built up and it was necessary to identify them and tap into them so that information could flow more freely to the intelligence group, where it could be analyzed and put to work.

To help the team responsible for the initiative identify potential sources of intelligence that can inform us about securities misconduct occurring in our markets, I lead a cross-divisional team through a group brainstorming exercise. I selected key employees from each department at the Commission, paying close attention to their roles to ensure that we had representatives of the Commission's many functions at the table. I designed a three-hour session using a *brainstorming with sticky notes* exercise to identify information of interest to the intelligence department.

Brainstorming with sticky notes is a great way to capture a large number of ideas quickly. Participants are not required to agree with one another because they are working alone for the first part of the exercise, generating ideas as fast as they can. This is an excellent technique to use with groups who have little experience sharing information. In this specific case, the ability of the participants to think quickly without deterrents was very important. I was hoping to access the participants' tacit knowledge, and I knew that the information we were seeking would not necessarily be an obvious source of intelligence on its own – its true value would be in the aggregate. As a result, I did not want participants to begin discarding their ideas at the outset. I gave each person a marker and a stack of sticky notes, and asked them to write down all the types of information they see, record, and discard in their roles. We quickly generated a lot of sticky notes!

I designed the next part of the exercise to bring order to the mass of information we had generated. I asked the participants to stick their notes along one wall of the meeting room. Whenever they encountered an identical type of information (for example if two participants had identified trade conferences as a source of info) they were to group them together. After all the

ideas were on the wall, we began to look over them together. We clustered them into logical groups such as industry contacts, internal sources of data, market data and enforcement contacts.

As a second exercise, I asked the group to consider what barriers existed that prevented us from sharing this information within our organization. To accomplish this task, I used flip charts and markers to record the suggestions of the group. In this case I felt it would be advantageous to work as a group in the hopes that some suggestions would trigger additional thoughts from other participants. I emphasized at the outset that the purpose of the exercise was not to find fault with any group, but to find new ways that information could be shared to accomplish our organizational objectives. The participants suggested small and large barriers and we were able to identify several important things. Most markedly, the information that could be used for intelligence analysis was held in several different data systems. For example, one compliance group was using a contact management system to record information, while another was using an in-house developed database. There was no central access point, no enterprise search and because of the secrecy attached to enforcement activities, few people had access to more than one system!

I later recorded the information I had gathered in a document and provided it to the project team with a report. Having reviewed the results of this session and other information-gathering activities, the Commission has identified a need for intelligence software that can search across information repositories and analyze the information to find patterns and trends.

TABLE 2. Systems found to contain potential intelligence data

Maximizer contacts databases
In-house developed databases
Email
Evidence-management system
Document management system
Old disk drives from before implementing EDMRS

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

Deborah Copeman, MLIS, is an information specialist at the Commission. When we purchased an enterprise document and records management system (EDRMS) for the Commission a few years ago, Deborah's role was to work on developing metadata standards and enhance the user experience for staff who would be managing their documents and records through the new system. In order to do so, it was essential that she understand how employees were already organizing their documents and identify the document description needs of each group to help optimize search and retrieval.

The document management system was initially rolled out to the Information Management Services division. To prepare for the initial rollout, Deborah and our Records Manager, Carol Williams, conducted a number of focus groups with staff. The purpose of the group exercises were two-fold: to identify and understand user needs and to communicate the value of the new system and the benefits staff would receive from using the new tool.

To prepare for the sessions, Deborah read up on focus group facilitation techniques and developed a list of questions to ask during the meetings. The list included open questions designed to get people talking and probing questions to get at important details. She also prepared a list of questions for herself that she reviewed before closing each session to ensure that she had captured the most important points she wanted to cover. Since Information Management is a very diverse division, it was important to organize the focus groups by work function. She held three sessions – one with the Systems Operations staff, one with the Systems Development staff and one with the Knowledge Management staff. Each group had eight to ten participants and the sessions lasted 1.5-2 hours during which time Deborah walked them through a discussion using the questions she had prepared. Major changes were made to the DM interface as a result of the information Deborah gathered at these sessions.

After the initial rollout, other divisions were introduced one by one to the document management system. Each subsequent rollout required focus groups to ensure that the system would also work for the new users' needs. Often the focus groups resulted in enhancements and tweaks to the metadata, descriptions screens and search screens in the system.

Key to this project were the techniques Deborah used to handle group dynamics respectfully. This ensured that all participants were heard during the process. As well, Deborah was sure to include both managers and employees in her meetings and to give equal air time to each. She relayed the information she gathered back to the users which gave made them feel heard and gave them an opportunity to clarify any issues. As with the decisions and orders planning process, people were able to feel involved and see the product that they helped create, which has resulted in greater buy-in across the Commission and a feeling of ownership of the document management system.

The entire Commission is now using the document management system and the project is considered a great success. Deborah recently received an employee service award for the valuable work she contributed to the project – much of which was based on her facilitations skills.

FACILITATION SKILLS FOR MANAGERS

Tracey Carmichael, MLIS, is the Manager of Knowledge Management Services at BCSC. She feels that the facilitation skills training has been one of the most applicable workshops she has attended, for several reasons. First, it provided her with a set of tools that could help unlock creativity and improve problem solving in her staff. Second, it provided her with a way to bring together staff from diverse professions such as librarianship, law and accounting to work towards a common goal. Finally, the exercises and tools provided in the training were a good match with the workplace culture at the BCSC.

Staff creativity is an important aptitude that is essential for a dynamic and responsive knowledge management program. Tracey uses her facilitation skills to unleash creativity in her staff in several ways. She uses a variety of facilitation exercises in group meetings and project planning to help fully explore ideas. One example of this is *mind mapping*, a creative exercise

that uses diagrams, colors and visual connections to completely map out a set of ideas. Tracey used this method with the public inquiries group to help determine whether this function is best handled by our department or would be more effective in a distributed model, with each BCSC department handling their own calls. After mapping out the services they were offering, it became clear that the public enquiries group was the best department to handle those tasks.

Tracey also uses structured thinking exercises to help her and her staff understand the root causes of problems. She has successfully used *fish-boning*, which is an exercise that allows groups to visually map out all the possible causes of a problem before brainstorming to find the right solution (see Cause & Effect Diagrams in the resources section for more information on this technique).

Tracey and her staff often work on organization-wide teams, which bring together professionals from a variety of backgrounds including lawyers, accountants, securities analysts, information professionals, and technical specialists. The Commission has used the *Six Thinking Hats* approach to problem solving to help groups identify solutions and make decisions collaboratively (see resources section more information on this approach), but in Tracey's experience the group facilitation exercises covered in our training are a more appropriate fit at the Commission. *Six Thinking Hats* works well when all participants share a workplace culture, but can seem silly when differences in communication style and philosophy exist. Using more targeted techniques such as a *fish boning diagram* or a *mind map* has been a success with our analytical staff.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

Tracey is responsible for the strategic direction of several key areas of the Commission – the knowledge centre, the public enquiries group and website and intranet services. Each spring she works with staff to identify priorities for the coming year in a strategic planning process. For the past two years, her facilitation skills have been an integral part of the planning process. This year she chose senior members of each team and organized a series of brainstorming exercises based on a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. Participants were given a marker and a stack of sticky notes and one by one, we worked through each of the four areas. Using the *brainstorming with sticky notes* exercise mentioned earlier, she asked us to write down as many ideas as we had without self-censoring. Since there were representatives of each service group at the meeting this resulted in an excellent cross-section of ideas.

After we had shared our ideas and grouped them by theme under the four areas represented by SWOT, Tracey led us through a structured decision-making exercise to help prioritize the most pressing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. For each quadrant (for example, threats) every participant was given three votes. You could use all three votes to nominate a threat you felt was imminent or crucial or you could spread your votes out over two or three threats. After all the participants had voted, the number of votes was tallied and we were left with a list of our most pressing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats – an invaluable resource for our subsequent planning.

TIPS AND TRICKS FROM BCSC EXPERIENCE

- Prepare ahead – you would never walk into a classroom without a lesson plan, and the same should be said for a meeting.
- Spell out the purpose of the meeting at the outset so that all the participants have a shared expectation of what needs to be accomplished. This will reduce boredom and skepticism.
- Include a profit statement in your introduction that explains how the work you accomplish in the session will be of benefit to the people in the room.
- Clarify your role to the participants so that they know what to expect. Will you be facilitating? Contributing as a participant? It is possible to do both, but if you do, it is essential that the other participants understand when you are switching roles.
- Understand when a creative (brainstorming) process is most appropriate and when a structured (decision making) process would be better. See the resources section for examples of both approaches.
- Choose tools and techniques that will appeal to your audience. A serious group of bankers may not want to color on flipcharts and a highly interactive group may be bored by solo activities such as *brainstorming on sticky notes*.
- Understand the group culture and choose your tools appropriately. If you are working with a group that tends to be adversarial, find ways to diffuse that approach. For example, brainstorming separately and then bringing the results together may result in more participation from the quieter participants and less conflict overall.
- If you want participants to be well prepared and give thoughtful answers, consider sending the questions in advance of the sessions.

RESOURCES

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