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Knowledge Management in Social Care  
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The previous issue of NISW Noticeboard described the work NISW is undertaking in promoting knowledge based management and practice as a means of ensuring the delivery of high quality services in social work and social care.

Since then the White Paper Modernising Social Services has been published, with a focus on promoting independence, improving protection and raising standards. Para 5.32 states that: 'As in other professions, it is important that professionally qualified social workers base their practice on the best evidence of what works for clients and are responsive to new ideas from research'.

This agenda has been developed over a number of years in the NHS, and has recently been further developed in the Information for Health White Paper which proposes a National Electronic Library for Health. The NELH ([www.nelh.nhs.uk](http://www.nelh.nhs.uk)) will co-ordinate a wealth of existing 'knowledge resources' in the NHS, and promote Knowledge Management throughout.

Information Management is a term with which many in social care will be familiar. NISW Briefing 17 on The Information Agenda in Social Services looked at this matter in some detail (available on the NISW website or from NISW Publications).

But what is Knowledge Management, and what can it offer social work and social care? It has been estimated that one in ten of the top companies in the United States now employs a 'Chief Knowledge Officer'. At a Knowledge Management conference in London last year there were speakers from multinational corporations with a wide variety of exotic designations:

- \* Global Director of Intellectual Asset Management
- \* Corporate Director of Intellectual Capital
- \* Leader of Collaboration, Knowledge and Learning
- \* Corporate Manager of Intellectual Properties.

There are a number of Knowledge Management conferences each year, Knowledge Management journals and Knowledge Management websites ([www.km.org](http://www.km.org)). Some striking claims have been made for Knowledge Management in the commercial sector: Texas Instruments avoided the cost of building a \$500 million wafer fabrication plant by leveraging internal knowledge and best practices.

So what exactly is Knowledge Management? Knowledge Management is a framework which aims to ensure that key internal and external information gets to those in the organisation who need it. This is very similar to Information Management, although in many cases Information Management has been interpreted simply as the management of IT-based information systems. However, where Knowledge Management diverges from Information Management is in the attempt it also makes to capture and exploit the expertise that lies in the heads of individuals - hence the focus of the job titles above.

Knowledge Management is primarily delivered through Information and Communication Technologies such as 'corporate intranets' - internal networks which have been developed to work like the world wide web. 'Groupware' software such as Lotus Notes enables individuals to share or otherwise make public their correspondence, reports and other key documents. Yellow Pages directories can be set up with each staff member providing details on their expertise, contacts and interests - enabling geographically distant staff to identify like minds in a way that would not normally be possible. One analogy for Knowledge Management is that it enables the kind of knowledge sharing that happens around the office coffee machine to take place amongst hundreds or even thousands of staff. 'Communities of interest' build on this. by setting up groups focusing on one particular task or area of expertise and enabling them to work together through the intranet.

So what of Knowledge Management in social work and social care? Back in 1982 our report Information Exchange: Swamp or Desert? highlighted the need for social services departments to provide 'gatekeepers' to help staff with the increasing volume of information being produced. For over ten years we have been supporting SSDs and SWDs through the NISW Information Service, and our caredata database is heavily used throughout the UK.

We are building on our expertise in this area to promote the idea of Knowledge Management in social work and social care in several ways: \* We are promoting the need for a National Electronic Library for Social Care under which a variety of existing research and information services and initiatives can work more closely together and which will provide a single point of access for practitioners, managers, service users and carers. \* The Scottish Office have commissioned us to develop with them a Knowledge Management website which will provide the NISW caredata database free of charge throughout Scotland and also develop a range of resources to support those in Scotland looking for research findings and those wishing to promote their findings.

\* We are developing an online staff knowledge base through which visitors to our website will be able to identify NISW staff with expertise in particular areas.

\* We are building on the success of our website by developing an intranet which will deliver internal documents (memos, working papers and other materials) as well as external information, to all our staff.

Other organisations in social care are developing intranets, and offering their staff access to the Internet. Research networks such as the Research in Practice initiative based at the Dartington Social Research Unit and supported by the ADSS, and the DH-funded Centre for Evidence Based Social Services at the University of Exeter, are placing the spotlight on the need for social services practice to be firmly based on sound evidence.

NISW sees Knowledge Management as a framework through which organisations can work to ensure that their staff have access to the information and knowledge that they need, and also to ensure that the organisation benefits from the expertise of their staff.

Too often the focus is on learning from external evidence, and new practices in other authorities or organisations, at the expense of the expertise that the organisation already possesses.

Which will be the first social care agency to appoint a Chief Knowledge Officer?

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