

Networking and the national training system

John Mitchell & Susan Young

core ideas

This paper focuses on the skills and knowledge needed for networking in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, to support the national training system.

Recent research by Reframing the Future (e.g. Mitchell & Young, 2001; Mitchell & Wood, 2001; Mitchell *et al*, 2002) shows that it is valuable for VET personnel involved in implementing the national training system to link with other stakeholders in the system. This often means developing relationships that extend across industries, across a State or Territory or nationally. Reframing the Future encourages stakeholders to value these networks and to be aware of the theoretical and practical components underpinning them.

This set of core ideas was prepared by John Mitchell, John Mitchell & Associates, consultant to Reframing the Future and Susan Young, National Project Director, Reframing the Future.

Why are more networks needed in VET?

A range of networks has always existed in VET, involving either industry and training providers, or both. These networks vary from those that predominantly consist of providers, say from horticulture or printing or the literacy fields, to those that are formed around, say, human resource (HR) staff from various enterprises. The existing VET networks also vary in their formality, size, structure, aims and the degree of focus on training.

Research by Reframing the Future shows that more networks involving industry and training providers are required to fully respond to the many challenges of implementing a national training system. These challenges include ensuring that the training is demand-driven and client-focused and of an appropriate and consistent quality. The challenges also include building relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including providers, industry-based trainers and human resource personnel, industry clients, industry representative groups and professional associations.

Reframing the Future has identified two broad types of current VET networks: industry training networks consisting of providers and industry personnel and assessor networks consisting of providers engaged in assessment. The members of the industry training networks normally include not just providers but also representatives of industry and enterprises that require training. The members of the assessor networks are normally assessors from a range of different providers, often from the one discipline such as engineering or tourism. The aims of both these types of networks commonly are to build training partnerships and to bring about growth in training.

How are networks different to other work structures?

Wenger & Snyder (2000) usefully distinguish between networks and three other work structures, as follows:

- work teams deliver a product or service;
- project teams seek to accomplish a specific task;

- communities of practice develop members' capabilities and exchange knowledge;
- networks collect and pass on knowledge.

The above definition of networks is possibly too narrow. Cohen & Prusak (2001, p.56) find that both networks and communities are groups of people brought together by common interests, experiences, goals, or tasks; and both imply regular communication and bonds characterised by some degree of trust and altruism. However, networks are different to communities of practice in a number of ways: communities of practice are harder to organise, maintain and sustain; and are often intense, high-effort and short-term. Networks are simpler to organise, rely mostly on mutual needs and are often long-lasting.

Networks are different to communities of practice in other ways: communities of practice enforce norms but networks are often too diffuse to do so; communities of practice have a type of closed membership while networks are open; and communities of practice have a shared domain of knowledge while networks are less concentrated in their focus (Cohen & Prusak, 2001, p.56).

What are the personal and business benefits of networks?

Cohen & Prusak (2001, pp.58-70) find that membership of a network implies a commitment to the group and its work and to cooperation. Network membership implies connection, based around the trust, understanding, and mutuality that support collaborative, cohesive action. As networks are built by investing some proportion of our time, money, energy and emotion in our connections, a network is one of the most powerful assets any individual can possess. Networks provide an interlocking web of connections and help people develop their identities. Networks also increase an organisation's social capital.

Alter & Hage (in Fulop and Linstead, 1999, p.446) find that the business benefits of organisations working together include:

- opportunities to learn and adapt and to develop competencies or products;
- a gain of resources – time, money, information, raw materials, legitimacy, status;
- an ability to manage uncertainty and to solve invisible and complex problems;
- an ability to specialise or diversify and to fend off competitors;
- rapid responses to changing market demands.

Networks are important for knowledge management, because much knowledge resides in groups, networks

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are the basis of knowledge sharing and, through trusting relationships, networks increase the level of knowledge. Networks can enhance each aspect of knowledge management, which include 'processes such as acquiring, creating and sharing knowledge and the cultural and technical foundations that support them' (Standards Australia, 2001, p.7). Considerable knowledge management is needed to implement the national training system: for instance, knowledge about the training requirements of industry, enterprises and individuals; knowledge about Training Packages; and knowledge about assessment strategies (Mitchell & Young, 2002).

How can networks be structured?

The structure of networks may vary, depending on what the participants prefer. Some participants may prefer a loosely organised network, based on collegiality and informality, while others may prefer a more formal structure, with a clear management framework and substantial documentation. The structure will need to be negotiated with the participants.

The networks funded by Reframing the Future are expected to be more than informal groups who interact randomly. A degree of structure and formality is expected, to ensure that all participants are able to access information and resources and other opportunities.

The scope and structure of a network may change during its life, as members seek to gain different benefits from involvement. For instance, early in the development of a network, joint goals need to be developed and collaborative strategies agreed upon, and at this stage the structure may still be fluid. As the network settles into operation, decisions may need to be made about how to gain optimum value from involvement and how to handle complex issues that arise, requiring a more formal structure. A mature network may only need a loose structure, as there are increasing levels of cooperation, coordination and joint planning.

What skills and knowledge are needed to support and maintain networks?

Significant skills are required to support VET networks, including skills for developing trust and commitment, skills for introducing joint planning and skills for managing groups through stages. As groups normally move through stages – often following Tuckman's famous cycle of forming, storming, norming and performing – different facilitation strategies are needed at each stage. Skippington (2002) provides a range of examples of networks using workbased learning strategies such as action learning, mentoring and coaching.

The knowledge needed to support networks includes a deep knowledge of the industry involved and an advanced

understanding of the national training system, including Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). These skills and knowledge need not reside in the one person, when a team approach is taken to managing a network.

Cohen & Prusak (2001, p.72) believe that the key to sustaining networks is maintaining trust, as people need time and opportunities to connect. Other critical success factors for networks include developing mechanisms for sharing knowledge, making it easy for members to access knowledge and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions. The value of networks can be analysed and promoted and managers can actively support networks, for example, by publicly acknowledging their value.

What are the challenges and limitations of networks?

Networking between stakeholders in VET is challenging because of the variety of stakeholders involved and because the stakeholders are sometimes widely distributed. For instance, in some industries small businesses dominate, but they can be widely disseminated across vast geographical areas. Sometimes networking involves communication across State or Territory borders, increasing the complexity of the negotiations. In other cases, networking is needed between disparate parties – for example, large enterprises, industry and union representatives and a range of provider types – who may not be accustomed to working together.

Cohen & Prusak (2001, p.70) note that networks can become like rigid clans: elitist, insular, idiosyncratic, corrupt or destructive. Networks can also develop 'groupthink' and ossify. Networks can breed unthinking loyalty and unquestioned shared beliefs. Warm and fuzzy networks prevent people from asking tough questions.

Using Cohen & Prusak (2001, p.76), a set of criteria for analysing the health of a network, could include:

- Trust: What is the level of trust and mutuality?
- Knowledge: How well is knowledge shared?
- Access: How easy is it for members to access each other?
- Engagement: How well are members listened to and assisted?
- Safety: Will members' ignorance and needs be used against them?

What are the opportunities for networks in VET?

Research by Reframing the Future (see references below) shows that opportunities for VET industry training networks are many and include the following:

- creating a partnership that previously did not exist or was under-developed;

- developing partnerships that are specifically focused on increasing the quality and quantity of training, for instance, in a specific industry or region;
- establishing innovative and effective links between and within different VET stakeholder groups to support the implementation of the national training system.

Demonstrated opportunities for VET assessor networks include:

- providing opportunities to reflect upon and improve practice, share information, access resources, validate assessment tools and develop new forms of collaboration with other assessors;
- enabling participants to address AQTF compliance issues, particularly Standard 9.2 regarding the validation of assessment strategies;
- working towards quality and consistency of assessment in relation to specific Training Packages, covering both on and off-the-job settings.

Networks can support the national training system by accessing the trust, goodwill, innovation, communication and sharing within the VET system in Australia; facilitating inter-organisational and cross-industry collaboration; and informing thinking in the field of VET about Training Packages, assessment and other fundamentals. Networking is a legitimate, necessary and valuable way to support the national training system.

References

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For more information, contact

Reframing the Future

PO Box 425 Elizabeth SA 5112

Telephone 08 8207 9655

Fax 08 8207 9708

<http://reframingthefuture.net>

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