



Managing Knowledge to Improve Reproductive Health Programs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Knowledge is a valuable resource that deserves to be—and can be—consciously managed. Using knowledge management (KM) tools, reproductive health program managers can systematically increase the creativity and empowerment of an organization's staff members and the efficiency and effectiveness of its operations. Better organizational performance can, in turn, lead to better health for clients.

Understanding knowledge management

Knowledge extends beyond data and information. It also includes the judgment and experience needed to take action—to run a clinic, design a behavior change campaign, or serve a client. While some knowledge is written down, most consists of the practical know-how and intuition stored in people's heads. Like written knowledge, this “tacit” knowledge, too, can be managed to increase organizational performance.

KM helps assure that knowledge and information are shared by the right people at the right time so they can make good decisions. It installs systematic processes to help knowledge flow horizontally among service delivery sites, departments, and colleagues as well as vertically up and down the chain of command. It reaches outside the organization to help knowledge flow to and from other organizations, clients, and the community.

People, processes, and technology are the three essential components of KM. People are primary because they implement KM processes as part of their daily work and help shape a knowledge-sharing organizational culture. KM processes include creating new knowledge, gathering and organizing existing knowledge, sharing knowledge with others, and adapting knowledge to fit different situations. While technology—ranging from simple phone directories to computers—can enable and expedite KM, it must be integrated with the way people work, address their real needs, and be appropriate to the setting.

CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
The Importance of Managing Knowledge	3
Understanding Knowledge Management	4
KM Toolbox	10
Meeting the Challenge:	
Sharing Knowledge	12
Learning from Experience	15
Coping with Too Much or Too Little Information	18
Next Steps	21
Case Studies:	
Sharing Knowledge at the AIDS Competence Programme	24
Creating a Poverty Grading System in Bangladesh	28
Feedback Form	31
Bibliography	33



MAQ PAPERS

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Key knowledge challenges for reproductive health

Reproductive health programs face three knowledge challenges. First is sharing knowledge: they must encourage staff members to take advantage of the knowledge, experience, and expertise available in their own and other reproductive health organizations and, at the same time, to share their own knowledge with colleagues. Second is learning from experience: they must draw on proven practices and lessons learned when planning projects and making decisions. Third is coping either with the flood of health information available online and in print—or else with limited access to any and all sources of needed information. KM tools and approaches can help managers meet each of these challenges.

Launching a KM initiative

Institutionalizing KM, so that it becomes a natural part of everyone's work, requires changes throughout the organization. Thus, a KM initiative might expand job descriptions (for example, requiring experienced providers to coach novice colleagues), add KM indicators to performance appraisals, create project teams that cross divisional lines, make it standard practice for those teams to generate and disseminate lessons learned, strengthen communication channels with distant service sites, encourage staff to routinely consult experts both inside and outside the organization, and establish partnerships with other reproductive health organizations. Such changes often reflect a sweeping change in organizational culture, so that all staff members respect and seek to engage in learning, innovation, collaboration, and evidence-based decision making.

The first step for reproductive health care managers who are interested in KM is to demonstrate to leaders and colleagues that investing in KM offers the organization real benefits. With the support of the leadership, managers can then form an exploratory group to assess how ready their organization is to undertake a formal KM initiative and to help design a KM strategy appropriate to its needs, resources, and situation.