Knowledge Sharing Innovations in the Natural Resources Community: A toolkit for community-based project teams

Fri, 24 Aug 2007

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The Electronic Commons: a community led natural resource knowledge portal was a collaborative program developed by the Wood Education and Resource Center of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, Northeastern Area States, and Northern Initiatives. Eight project teams were funded to explore technology-based strategies such as Web sites and Webinars as tools for sharing knowledge on natural-resource topics of concern to their communities and to build communities of practice.This toolkit is the product of a ninth project funded through the Electronic Commons Program to produce a guidance document for future similar efforts undertaken in the natural resources community.

An ala carte approach to the Toolkit

This toolkit was written for two primary audiences – the first is project managers engaged in information technology-based innovations in the public and not-for-profit sectors and the second is funding agencies. While the full toolkit has value to both audiences, specific sections may be more suited to certain readers as a starting place.

Program or Project Managers

. . . managing multi-organizational, geographically separated teams, might start at:

- Chapter 5, Critical Success Factors, which focuses on the strategies the eight project teams found key to their success.
- Chapter 3 subsection, titled “Working in multi-organizational, geographically dispersed teams,” which provides a sense of the obstacles project teams face in this context.

. . . selecting technology to support a multi-organizational, geographically separate team, might start at:

- Chapter 4 subsection, titled “Choosing the right technology for your teamwork — virtual or otherwise,” which provides guidance to project managers on the kinds of questions a project manager should have the answers to before selecting technology to support communication and collaboration among team members.
- Appendix B, which identifies the technologies used in the eight projects and summarizes the related experiences of each team in selecting and using technology.

. . . selecting technology for sharing knowledge among geographically dispersed audiences, might start at:

- Chapter 4 subsection, titled “ Choosing the right tools to share knowledge,” which provides information on the issues in the environment project managers should pay attention to when selecting delivery tools.
- Chapter 5, specifically subsections “Align purpose with identified needs and capabilities of your stakeholders” and "Understand and be comfortable with the technology,” which offers guidance on how to ensure stakeholders’ needs and capabilities are taken into account when choosing technologies.
- Appendix B includes a set of tables organized around the characteristics of the various projects and of the technologies employed in each project.

. . . writing a grant proposal for technology-based knowledge sharing innovations, might start at:

- Chapter 6, which provides guidance on the grant proposal process collected from the eight grantees.

Funders

. . . awarding small grants aimed at technological innovation in the non-for-profit sector, might start at:

- Chapter 2, Assessing Impact, which highlights the value delivered to the natural resources community by the eight projects.
- Chapter 3, Environmental Complexity, which presents observations about the obstacles not-for-profit agencies face when engaging in innovation, technology or otherwise, and provides guidance to assist project teams in overcoming these challenges.
- Chapter 6 provides additional advice to funders on creating a set of conditions to increase the likelihood that funds provided to project teams will generate the expected outcome.