Sharing Day

Lotte De Rore, Monique Snoeck, Guido Dedene
LIRIS Group, Faculty of Business and Economics, K.U.Leuven
Naamsestraat 69, 3000 Leuven, Belgium
{Lotte.DeRore, Monique.Snoeck}@econ.kuleuven.be

1 Introduction

In the IT department of a bank and insurance company, when Susan from the loan department is confronted with a problem, she will ask the members of her team for help or maybe the colleague sitting next to her. But it will not occur to her that Mike from the insurance department might have had this same problem before...

Knowledge is a very important asset for a company. Several techniques exist to share knowledge within a company. This paper introduces one of these techniques: SHARING DAY. The pattern language first describes why and when to organize a SHARING DAY and subsequently how to organize such an event.

2 Pattern Language

2.1 Overview of the Patterns

SHARING DAY	Create an explicit time to bring people physically together at the same location in order to encourage knowledge sharing on a broad basis.
PALLET OF ACTIVITIES	Match the form of the SHARING DAY to the kinds of knowledge and purposes you wish to share.
DRY RUN	Perform a DRY RUN of the sessions to see whether the stories in the different sessions are attuned on each other and attuned to the audience.
VISIBLE INVOLVEMENT	Make visible that the company attaches great importance to the SHARING DAY and stress the personal benefit of attending the SHARING DAY.
CENTRALIZED INFORMATION POINT	Centralize all communication about the SHARING DAY in one point to conserve the coherence.
KEEP IT FUN	KEEP IT FUN to help people stay involved and alert all the time during the SHARING DAY.
PROVIDE A BACK-UP	PROVIDE A BACK-UP to prevent the SHARING DAY from falling apart if some of the contributors drop out right before the planned day.

2.2 SHARING DAY

The hierarchical structure typical in large companies divides employees in several divisions. In each of these divisions, we find people with the same positions and roles, confronted with the same problems. Within a group, we have a diversity of knowledge and experience.

Knowledge sharing about the profession only occurs between colleagues in their own surroundings (within their own team or division); there is no spontaneous knowledge sharing on a broad base.

Knowledge within a company is a very important asset. In order to share knowledge about the profession, a discussion forum does not work. The most plausible reason for this is that people need to find free time to search or contribute to the discussion forum. The communication on a discussion forum happens in an asynchronous way which is not the most effective way of communication [1]. A personal and direct way of communication (like face to face) is the most powerful way of communication [1]. Also, in a culture with high expectations with respect to quality of solutions and answers, people wonder whether their knowledge is good enough to share e.g. on a discussion forum.

The project driven way of working in a company does not encourage knowledge sharing between teams or divisions. Every activity is budgeted and when in need for information, employees ask themselves whether it is justified to make time to communicate with other people. In addition they often don't know who they should talk with. The deadline of a project is seen as the most important factor and as a consequence, people work in a deliverable driven way rather than to strive for a uniform way of working across projects.

However, for a company in expansion, the kind of projects will change. When a company is still small, almost all projects are rather small and limited to the context of a single division. But when a company expands, projects grow and happen in an organization-wide context, involving several divisions in one project.

Local networking within the same division is no longer sufficient. Knowledge sharing and information exchange between divisions is necessary. There needs to be a way to make all the aspects within a job visible. For example, how to deal with a process, a tool or communication? What does it mean to fulfill a particular job?

Therefore,
Create an explicit time to bring people physically together to the same location by organizing a SHARING DAY.

The main purpose of the SHARING DAY is to give people a chance to share experiences. But even more important than sharing knowledge is to encourage networking, to know who knows what might be more useful than knowing something yourself. It is therefore important to withdraw the people from their normal work context. By having the event off site, one can avoid interruptions that disturb the flow of the event (LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION [2]).

The practical organization of such a big event as a SHARING DAY should not be underestimated. It consumes a lot of time to organize a well structured event. To ensure that the activities are fitting the variety of goals of a SHARING DAY, you should build the program

using a PALLET OF ACTIVITIES. A DRY RUN can help to see whether the stories in the different sessions are attuned on each other and attuned to the audience. Besides the content, the practical side of bringing a large group of people together needs preparation too: room reservations, parking places, printed matters being only some of the issues. Since you would like as many people as possible to show up for the sharing day, you should ensure a VISIBLE INVOLVEMENT of a company and communicate effectively using a CENTRALIZED INFORMATION POINT. While attending the sessions of the SHARING DAY, participants may lose interest as the day goes on. So KEEP IT FUN to help people stay involved and alert all the time. And finally, the initial enthusiasm of contributors may fade away when faced with the preparation work, so you should PROVIDE A BACK-UP to prevent the sharing day from falling apart if some of the contributors drop out right before the planned day.

A SHARING DAY is a big event and should only be organized when you want to bring a large group together, i.e. when there is diversity in knowledge and experience within the group and when there is a diversity of knowledge and experience you want them to pick up. Otherwise, it is sufficient to encourage knowledge sharing in smaller groups, e.g. by a training course or a coaching session.

The company KBC ICT organized a sharing day [3] "To WPF or not to WPF" to bring together the people from their work preparation community (about 140 people) and to share knowledge about their work preparation framework (WPF): the method, the tool and the process. The main goal of this sharing day was to share experiences, lessons learned and real cases with each other.

At ThoughtWorks [4], once or twice a year, they organize Away Days. Employees tend to be at different client sites and do not necessarily have the opportunity to share everything they have learned or to meet each other face-to-face. Away Days or Sharing Days give this opportunity.

2.3 PALLET OF ACTIVITIES

You will organize a SHARING DAY to bring people together to exchange knowledge and experience and to encourage networking. There exist several forms to organize such a session. For example, a *knowledge fair* with different booths where people can walk around to 'shop' for information, *plenary sessions* to reach a large group at once, *workshops* in smaller groups to collect and share experiences and ideas with respect to a specific topic or an informal *drink or reception* where people can meet and talk with each other. However, not every form is suitable for each purpose and as all people are different, not every form will work for everyone.

What is the most effective form for the SHARING DAY?

The first purpose of SHARING DAY is exchanging knowledge. However, there are different kinds of knowledge. There is optional knowledge that is nice to know for the participants and from which they can choose whether they feel there is a need, but there is also knowledge that is part of the goals of the SHARING DAY, and you definitely want people to know at the end of the SHARING DAY. Also, the information can have a general character and be meant for a broad audience. Or the information can be very specific about a particular topic. Not all forms will be suitable to transfer each kind of information.

Each form brings the information in a different way. In a presentation there will be only one way of knowledge exchange namely from the presenter to the audience, while sometimes it might be advisable to have more interaction with the audience.

Frequently, knowing something is less important than knowing who knows something. Especially in large company you can not expect everyone to share everything they know but knowing who does know is more useful. Therefore the other and maybe even more important purpose of SHARING DAY is networking. Not every form of SHARING DAY lends itself for networking.

Therefore,
Match the form of the SHARING DAY to the kinds of knowledge and purposes you wish to share.

In a *plenary session* the whole group is reached at once. Besides presentations about more general topics, these plenary sessions are also ideal to start and end the day with. An overview of the day (what can the participants expect), who has contributed to the sharing day and of course, also practical things as room allocation, timings etc. can be provided in a plenary session.

A *workshop* might be more appropriate when interaction with the audience is required. For more theoretical sessions, where you want to teach the participants a new part of the methodology or how to use a tool, you need smaller groups to be sure you can pass the message. These workshops will be more concrete than the general plenary sessions. Consequently, the danger exists that the target audience for the workshop is not as broad as the target audience for the SHARING DAY. To avoid this, let the participants choose which workshops they want to attend.

The *knowledge fair* can be used to provide information that is 'nice to know' rather than 'need to know'. People can shop for the information they want by visiting several booths. These booths can consist of real cases, the education possibilities, contact persons, etc.

Providing information is only one of the goals of a SHARING DAY. Even more important is the networking aspect. In order to encourage this networking, you need enough time and possibilities for the participants to meet and talk with each other. More informal sessions as lunch together or a *reception* at the end of the sharing day can provide this.

Within one functional domain there are different roles with different competences and knowledge (business analysts, systems analysts, technical analysts, etc.). The chosen pallet of sessions should be balanced across general sessions aiming at networking and more specific sessions offering tailored information for a particular target role or target domain.

The alternation in styles and forms has an advantage that it keeps the participants alert and interested. KEEP IT FUN is another way to achieve this.

Depending on how broad the audience for the SHARING DAY is, not all sessions might be of interest for everyone. One option is to let the participants choose which of the sessions they follow. Another option is to make different tracks where all sessions are mandatory. This last option might be less complex to organize: participants are divided in several groups and each group has to follow a prescribed path through the different sessions.

"To WPF or not to WPF" started with coffee and each participant received a documentation file (which booths at the knowledge fair, which workshops). The plenary session opened with the results the knowledge management team from the WP community achieved the past year. After the plenary session, the participants could choose 2 out of 5 workshops to attend. There was among others a workshop about the new community portal and one about the modeling tool Mega and how this is related with WP. After a lunch, the participants were invited for the knowledge fair with 11 booths (KM instruments, best practices: how and where to find them, education possibilities, real cases,…). After another plenary session with a guest speaker, the day ended with a reception.

2.4 DRY RUN

You organize a SHARING DAY consisting of several sessions.

You want to bring a clear message with the sessions on a SHARING DAY; the participants should have these right messages at a single glance.

A lot of people cooperate to organize a big event as a SHARING DAY. The different sessions, workshops and booths in the knowledge fair are prepared by several people, with different backgrounds, opinions and visions. Varying personal visions should not dominate the agreed shared overall message you want to have for the SHARING DAY.

One of the aspects of a SHARING DAY is to let people bring their own story and experiences. However, these people are not always the most experienced speakers and might be not be so confident to speak in front of a group or to lead a workshop.

Therefore,
Do a DRY RUN of the different sessions to see whether the material in the different sessions is attuned.

The first purpose of the DRY RUN is to see whether all the material presented at the SHARING DAY is attuned: attuned with each other (e.g. is there overlap between the sessions? are there contradicting messages?) and attuned with the target audience (e.g. is the material clear for the target audience? Will they need more information than delivered in the sessions?). The SHARING DAY has one general message and this should be visible in all the material. With this DRY RUN, the organizers can check whether they'll reach their goals.

Next to attuning the material, this dry run also gives confidence to the people contributing to the SHARING DAY. The less experienced speakers get a chance to practice the story they want to tell. The booth keepers get feedback whether their posters and material bring a visible message. The speakers of the plenary session might not need a test run of their presentation; often these are the experts in their field and are confident enough about their story. Also in the one way interaction of such a presentation, there is less chance that hard questions will interrupt the session compared to an interactive workshop where the audience steers the session. Nevertheless, it might still be interesting to go through the slides to see whether the story is concrete enough and the 'expert' language is adapted to the audience.

At this DRY RUN, the flyer with the core message of each session given to all participants is screened.

However, it is not the intention of the DRY RUN to perform a complete test run of all the sessions, as this might be too time-consuming. In any case, organizing a DRY RUN will add an extra cost.

2.5 VISIBLE INVOLVEMENT

You are organizing a SHARING DAY.

How to convince people to join the SHARING DAY?

Attending the SHARING DAY should be mandatory for all members of the target audience or at least strongly encouraged. However, the time pressure for other projects might be a reason to be unable to attend the event.

Therefore,
Make visible that the company attaches great importance to the SHARING DAY and stress the personal benefit of attending the SHARING DAY.

Management empowerment is an important fact in a company with a hierarchical structure. The influence of people in authority in this hierarchical structure should not be underestimated. Inviting people from management gives a sign about the importance to attend the SHARING DAY. Also mentioning the number of budget assigned to the event (for example in the invitation letter) helps to convince them of the importance to attend these sessions.

Although the main goal of the SHARING DAY is a company goal, namely to create a network for knowledge sharing, one should also pay attention to the personal interests of people. When people can see an added value in attending the SHARING DAY for their own benefit, interest and job, they will be more inclined and motivated to attend the SHARING DAY than when they have the feeling there is only a benefit for the company.

2.6 CENTRALIZED INFORMATION POINT

You want to organize a SHARING DAY. Such a day is not only created for but also by a community. From the start, a lot of communication about this event needs to be sent to the participants.

How to conserve the coherence in all the messaging about the SHARING DAY?

A sharing day is a large event that needs a long time of preparation and is gradually built. It starts with an idea, searching for interested people to cooperate, the registration, publishing the program of the day. When all this communication goes through the mailbox of the whole community, they will be swamped with emails.

Therefore,
Centralize all the communication in one point, for example the portal of the community.

The SHARING DAY is organized for a particular target audience. Often such a community has its own portal with all kinds of information. This portal can be used to centralize all the communication for the SHARING DAY. As this event needs a lot of preparation and some of this preparation needs input from the community itself, by keeping all information centralized, as the event is built up step by step, the communication can be given without losing the coherence between the different steps.

All communication for the WPF-SHARING DAY went through the portal of the work preparation community.

2.7 KEEP IT FUN

You are organizing a SHARING DAY.

How do you keep the audience alert?

Attending the several sessions of the SHARING DAY, it might be a long day to stay alert all the time.

Therefore,
Insert some frivolous elements.

In a SHARING DAY, you need to care for alternation, dynamics and iterations. Fun is a way to insert alternation and dynamics into your event which will preserve the energy. By breaking out of the normal course of the day, you keep the people alert and interested. Additionally, when you wrap the message in a nice/funny package, people will remember it longer.
However, do not go too extreme with this. Keep your target audience in mind so that the fun parts don't come across too childish.

During the WPF-SHARING DAY, participants indicated their opinion about several statements on large thermometers placed outside the auditorium. Additional, instead of normal name cards, participants wore a card with a statement about WPF.

2.8 PROVIDE A BACK-UP

You organize a SHARING DAY. Part of this SHARING DAY is organized by volunteers, for example the booths at the knowledge fair.

However, people often underestimate the effort it needs to develop an idea to a session or booth.

Lots of people will be enthusiastic at the start and come up with nice ideas to bring on the SHARING DAY. But it takes time and effort to evolve from an idea into a well-organized workshop or a completely worked-out booth for the knowledge fair. Often people underestimate this and drop out near the end of the preparation phase and close to the day of the event.

You bring one story at the SHARING DAY and all the messages in the different sessions build up to this one story and message. When people drop out, there is a risk that your concept of the sharing day falls apart.

Therefore,
Always provide some back-up material in case people drop out at the end.

At the start, while brainstorming for ideas, plenty of ideas for sessions and booths will come up of which only a few will be selected to work out. However, the other ideas can serve as back-up material. Be aware, as an organizer, to incorporate the required time to work out these ideas last minute.

Acknowledgements

References

[1]   Kelly Burke and Laku Chidambaram, 'Do Mediated Contexts Differ in Information   Richness? A Comparison of Collocated and Dispersed Meetings' Proceedings of the 29th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences - 1996
[2]   Mary Lynn Manns and Linda Rising, 'Fearless change: patterns for introducing new ideas', Addison-Wesley, 2004
[3]   The instrument SHARING DAY was developed and implemented by DNV CIBIT in cooperation with KBC ICT/ knowledge management team
[4]   Direct communication with Jason Yip, ThoughtWorks