

# Disseminating Knowledge Products

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## Rationale

Dissemination is the interactive process of communicating knowledge to target audiences so that it may be used to lead to change. The challenge is to improve the accessibility of desired knowledge products by those they are intended to reach. This means ensuring physical availability of the product to as large a proportion of the target audience as possible and making the product comprehensible to those who receive it.

The production of knowledge,<sup>1</sup> much of which represents invaluable intellectual capital, lies at the heart of modern organizations. However, the value of any knowledge product hangs on its effective dissemination to—present and future—audiences: without outreach the efforts of knowledge workers are wasted.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, dissemination is a core responsibility of any organization tasked with generating and sharing knowledge products, especially of new kinds of unique (and uniquely valuable) content<sup>3</sup> that are as usable and accessible as possible. Dissemination of knowledge is just as important as its production.<sup>4</sup>



## Definition

At the simplest level, dissemination is best described as the delivering and receiving of a message, the engagement of an individual in a process, or the transfer of a process or product. It is also helpful to think about dissemination in three broadly different ways, viz., dissemination for awareness, for understanding, and for action.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, effective dissemination of a knowledge product will most likely require that it satisfy all three in turn: utilization is the goal.

<sup>1</sup> E.g., know-how, good practices, and intellectual property.

<sup>2</sup> Poor dissemination explains much of the gap between knowledge and practice. Enormous amounts of knowledge are never communicated beyond their immediate circles of interest and remain unused. Diffusion of innovation in health care, for example, is a considerable challenge. (In this complex case, dissemination dictates that particularly close attention be paid to perceptions of the innovation, the characteristics of the people who adopt the innovation or fail to do so, and contextual factors such as communication, incentives, leadership, and management.)

<sup>3</sup> Traditional dissemination practices have on the whole relied on production of print artifacts through established publishing routes (even though print-based distribution systems retard and limit the development of ideas.) Research data, audio, video, and multimedia works, as well as new forms of digital works and scholarly resources, are instances of non-traditional content that must be actively managed for dissemination purposes in a networked environment.

<sup>4</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, this means that high-performance organizations must employ all existing infrastructure and continue to invest in policy work as well as in organizational and technological strategies to build capability to disseminate.

<sup>5</sup> Awareness may foster interest in greater understanding that may in turn provide the basis for action.

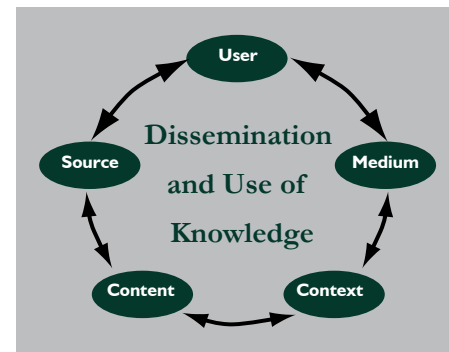
## Barriers to Dissemination

Most barriers to dissemination are psychological or social from the onset.<sup>6</sup> But where efforts to disseminate knowledge products are earnest low impact<sup>7</sup> is mainly attributable to poor planning and the absence of a dissemination strategy. (Central to that is recognition that the dissemination process should be interactive, allowing feedback from audiences according to a cyclical model of communications flow.)

**Key Steps.** High-performance organizations (i) adopt a strategic approach to dissemination, (ii) know their target audiences, (iii) formulate generic, viable dissemination strategies that can be amended to suit different purposes, (iv) hit the target, and (v) monitor and evaluate their accomplishments. They do so because they can answer the following questions:

- **What do we want to disseminate?** Dissemination is only achievable and successful if, from the outset, there is a shared vision and common understanding of what it is one wants to disseminate together with a way of describing that to those who stand to benefit from it.
- **What is the target audience and what are we offering it?** It is important to identify and be clear about who the target audience is to map it to one of the categories in the awareness, understanding, and action model. Since target audiences tend to be long rather than short, it is best to concentrate on who, at the very least, needs to be informed, and then prioritize for awareness, understanding, and action. Next, it is essential to think about what benefits the knowledge product will have to offer. Nothing interests a user more than a potential solution to his or her particular problem: the most successful dissemination strategies are those that actively engage target audiences and deliver what they both need and want. One must then examine the knowledge product and think of how it might be presented as a benefit and solution to users.
- **When do we disseminate?** Dissemination exercises have milestones that must be identified and set early. They must also be realistic.
- **What are the most effective ways of disseminating?** Reports are concrete outputs that can be easily evidenced as solid methods of dissemination. But, it is important to explore and evaluate what vehicles meet the needs of target audiences most effectively and appropriately. Varying them will also increase the chances of success.
- **Who might help us disseminate?** Target audiences already have journals, events, professional bodies, and subject associations they engage with. Dissemination will stand a greater chance of success if one can work through existing channels. Collaborating probably improves the impact of dissemination and reduces costs.
- **How do we prepare our strategy?** The strategy flows from the above to cover (i) the objective of dissemination, (ii) what knowledge product one proposes to disseminate, (iii) target audiences, (iv) benefits to users, (v) dissemination methods and related activities, (vi) timescales and responsibilities, (vii) targets, (viii) costs, and (ix) evaluation and criteria for success.
- **How do we turn our strategy into a dissemination plan?** Producing a coherent dissemination strategy does not necessarily result in effective implementation. A clear set of actions must be articulated covering (i) objective, (ii) target audiences, (iii) methods, (iv) vehicles, (v) timing, and (vi) responsibility.

**Figure: Relationship of Key Elements of Dissemination Leading to Knowledge Utilization**



Source: Author

<sup>6</sup> In an organization, psychological barriers relate to reciprocity, repute, and altruism. Social barriers relate to organizational culture, and the social networks that frame it. Social factors are the most frequently cited roadblock to knowledge management success. See ADB. 2008. *Notions of Knowledge Management*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/notions-knowledge-management.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/notions-knowledge-management.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Intended impacts are not necessarily the same. Specific objectives might be to influence policy, change practice, contribute to an evidence base, and/or inform target audiences of progress. Obviously, the nature of intended impacts has implications for approaches to dissemination of related knowledge products.

- **How do we cost our dissemination activities?** Having developed the dissemination strategy and turned it into a dissemination plan, one needs to make sure that each dissemination activity has been carefully costed. It is always possible to obtain estimates of costs for all aspects of dissemination. The different aspects for consideration when running a workshop, for example, will relate among others to venue or room hire; equipment, e.g., overhead projectors, laptops; refreshments; lunch; travel to and from the workshop; publicity materials; and subsidies for participants.
- **How will we know we have been successful?** An effective dissemination strategy will only continue to be effective if it is viewed as an evolving and constantly developing process. The context in which we work changes over the course of our activities and the contexts in which users work are likely to change too.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is important to put in place mechanisms for reviewing progress. However, one can only do so if clear targets are established at the outset. One of the most effective ways of establishing targets is to link them to the broad purposes of dissemination (i) awareness, (ii) support and favorability, (iii) understanding, (iv) involvement, and (v) commitment. In each instance, it will be useful to identify beforehand (i) the target group, (ii) the target, (iii) the timescale, (iv) the reasons for selection, and (v) the criteria for success.

**Table 1: Relative Merits of Development Research Dissemination Pathways**

Dissemination Pathway	Advantage	Disadvantage
<b>Working document</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May target research findings to particular groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited access</li> </ul>
<b>Research report</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides a single reference point for all aspects of the research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumes the report is read by a single audience group</li> <li>• May be written in an inaccessible manner</li> </ul>
<b>Academic, refereed journal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informs the scientific community of findings, Citations lead to wider impacts on intellectual networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited audience</li> <li>• May be written in an inaccessible manner</li> <li>• Lacks a practical orientation</li> </ul>
<b>Professional journal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaches a wide practitioner community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic rigor may be lower than that in a referred journal</li> </ul>
<b>Stand-alone textbook</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for impact on wide audiences</li> <li>• Potential to influence development professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty in accessing key texts in developing countries</li> <li>• Not practice-oriented</li> </ul>
<b>Conference, workshop, seminar</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May allow professionals to learn more</li> <li>• Potential for networking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expense</li> </ul>
<b>Training manual</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps to translate information into knowledge that can be applied</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited audience</li> <li>• Expense</li> </ul>
<b>Networking</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reaches members who share common interests</li> <li>• Reduces "reinvention of the wheel"</li> <li>• Potential for interaction, discussion, and review of findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically low levels of active participation</li> <li>• Requires strong incentives for participation</li> <li>• Time consuming to operate and manage</li> </ul>
<b>Internet, electronic mail</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immediate, convenient</li> <li>• Wide interest in electronic media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to hardware may be limited in developing countries</li> <li>• Potential may be or is temporarily underdeveloped</li> <li>• Expense</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> The conventional model of knowledge transfer is linear: information flows from a provider to a user via a certain medium. In reality, knowledge transfer is an interactive, multi-directional exchange of know-how, good practices, or intellectual property.

Dissemination Pathway	Advantage	Disadvantage
<b>Intermediaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensures that knowledge is translatable based on local norms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problems may arise if research agenda of intermediaries is not consistent with the knowledge product</li> </ul>
<b>Popularization, promotional artifact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reaches wide audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Core message may be diluted or misinterpreted during the process of popularization</li> </ul>
<b>Publicizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reaches wide audiences at relatively low cost</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No control over interpretation of message</li> </ul>
<b>Participatory concept</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Translates research results into practical guidance at the community level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Time consuming</li> </ul>
<b>Policy briefs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential to influence the decision making process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty in gaining access to decision makers</li> </ul>
<b>Interactive computer presentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difficulty in gaining access to decision makers</li> <li>Limited access to hardware</li> <li>Expense</li> </ul>
<b>Demonstration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited audience</li> </ul>

Source: Based on Julie Fisher, Frank Odhiambo, and Andrew Cotton. 2003. *Spreading the Word Further: Guidelines for Disseminating Development Research*. Water, Engineering, and Development Center, Loughborough University.

### Box: Characteristics of a Successful Dissemination Plan

- The dissemination plan reflects the needs of the target audiences. It relies on appropriate form, language, and information content levels.
- The plan incorporates various dissemination techniques such as written, graphical, electronic, print, broadcast, and verbal media. The methods include summary documents; electronic dissemination within the organization and to key informants outside it; cross postings on web pages; press releases; media coverage; flyers, posters, and brochures; letters of thanks to study participants; newsletters to study participants; events and conferences; and seminars. Each method calls for its own format and means of dissemination and includes both proactive and reactive channels—that is, it includes information content that the target audiences have identified as important and information content that the audiences may not know to request but is likely to be of interest. The dissemination techniques are more likely to succeed when their packaging and information content has been influenced by inputs from the target audiences.
- The dissemination plan draws on existing capabilities, resources, relationships, and networks to the maximum extent possible. It also builds the new capabilities, resources, relationships, and networks that the target audience needs.
- The dissemination plan includes effective quality control mechanisms to ensure that the information content is accurate, relevant, representative, and timely.
- The plan identifies the resources required for implementation.
- The plan provides a framework for monitoring and evaluation. It explains how one will know that dissemination activities have been successful. If data is to be gathered, it describes how this will be achieved, when, and who will gather it.

## Lessons Learned

In their review of organizational experience in improving the impact of knowledge and research, Julie Fisher, Frank Odhiambo, and Andrew Cotton drew five sets of lessons:

Area	Key Lesson
<b>Dissemination strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A generic, organizational strategy that can be amended to suit different purposes is the most effective mechanism.</li> <li>• Dissemination planning is best informed by carrying out a use needs' assessment of the target audiences whom one seeks to influence.</li> <li>• Using the experience of all individuals involved in dissemination in an organization leads to a comprehensive strategy.</li> <li>• Internal dissemination is a necessary element of a dissemination strategy as it strengthens overall capacity in this area.</li> </ul>
<b>Target audiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A formal target audience information needs assessment (including an understanding of socio-cultural factors) generates information on what information (content, style, resource requirements, and language) should be provided and the way in which it should be delivered.</li> <li>• Ensuring local relevance of information results in increases receptiveness by audiences.</li> <li>• Different local versions of information can be produced based on user needs analysis data.</li> </ul>
<b>Dissemination pathways</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A multiple channel dissemination approach reaches the broadest audience.</li> <li>• The mass media can be a useful mass dissemination pathway, if a corresponding information culture prevails in which research and information is distributed in this way.</li> <li>• The potential of electronic information is recognized but this should be supplemented by other dissemination approaches.</li> <li>• Dissemination methods found to be successful in the South but used less frequently by the Northern researchers can provide valuable opportunities to reach target audiences.</li> <li>• A useful route of access to target audiences is through infomediaries although careful selection is important.</li> </ul>
<b>Viability and funding issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient funding is the main barrier to a viable dissemination strategy and accurate costs associations attached to the issue of paying for information.</li> <li>• Use of networks provides a means of strengthening the viability of a dissemination strategy for the chosen period.</li> </ul>
<b>Impact issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The various dissemination monitoring and evaluation techniques should be pre-tested prior to use.</li> <li>• Indicators of successful uptake of the message are often perceived to be indicators of successful dissemination practice. A combination of direct and proxy indicators can provide an acceptable measure of how well we have reached our audience.</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled from Julie Fisher, Frank Odhiambo, and Andrew Cotton. 2003. *Spreading the Word Further: Guidelines for Disseminating Development Research*. Water, Engineering, and Development Center, Loughborough University.

## Further Reading

ADB. 2008a. *Using Plain English*. Manila. Available: [www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/using-plain-english.pdf](http://www.adb.org/documents/information/knowledge-solutions/using-plain-english.pdf)

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Julie Fisher, Frank Odhiambo, and Andrew Cotton. 2003. *Spreading the Word Further: Guidelines for Disseminating Development Research*. Water, Engineering, and Development Center, Loughborough University.

## For further information

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