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USING NETWORKS TO ENHANCE HEALTH SERVICES DELIVERY: PERSPECTIVES, PARADOXES, AND PROPOSITIONS
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• People involved in creating networks need to anticipate the challenges that exist and how to overcome them if they want to improve rates of knowledge transfer.

• Deciding how networks should be set up and governed, who should provide the resources, and measuring effectiveness are among the biggest challenges.

• Non-hierarchical networks built on trust and mutual respect provide the best knowledge transfer results.

Networks are groups of people and organizations brought together, virtually or otherwise, for a common purpose. In their work, authors Timothy Huerta, Ann Casebeer, and Madine VanderPlaat focus on health service delivery networks. However, many of their insights are applicable to any setting. The authors identify six challenges or “paradoxes” that are vital to a network’s success. This summary focuses on three of the challenges most relevant to knowledge transfer practitioners: structure, resourcing, and evaluation of networks.

Structure: Who’s in charge?
Networks have to accommodate many organizations and organizational structures under one umbrella. This can lead to loyalty and governance challenges.

• Loyalty — To get the most out of a network, members need to address where their loyalty lies: with the network or with their organization. Networks work best when members recognize network loyalty often best serves their own organizations.

• Governance — Networks also tend to work non-hierarchically (without a central authority) to promote trust and collaboration. However, network members working in hierarchical organizations often find it difficult to accept this non-hierarchical relationship with other organizations. They may attempt to take shortcuts past this discomfort, such as pressuring a particular member to take a “lead” role. Such shortcuts undermine trust and effectiveness. Networks that foster trust and mutual respect experience the best rates of knowledge transfer.

Resourcing: It takes money to make money
Knowledge that is shared in networks can save member organizations money in the long run. However, it also takes money and resources to get networks up and running. If contributions are disproportionate an imbalance of power can occur, as better-funded organizations will find it easier to maintain their network presence. To address the imbalance, imaginative and innovative ways to maintain network equality are needed. This benefits all member organizations.
Evaluation: Is it working?

Networks form around important and complex issues, yet they often lack proven methods for evaluating impact. The evaluation methods of most member organizations are suitable for “in-house” evaluation but not for work that occurs between organizations or in networks. Each network needs to define its own ways of evaluating benefits with this in mind.

Summary

Participation in networks provides benefits (such as improved economic efficiencies and improved knowledge transfer) but also poses challenges for member organizations. By considering both, members and their organizations can become better network players.

Bibliographic Reference


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