

Reflecting on my interviews with different members of KM4Dev

During December 2013/January 2014, I spoke with different members of the KM4Dev network in order to understand their usual routine around KM4Dev, the different ways that they currently participate, and how they see themselves participating in the future. In addition, members shared the benefits they have gained through their participation and their reflections on the administration of a group like KM4Dev. Summaries of the interviews are posted here [http://wiki.km4dev.org/KM4Dev Futures: Interviews with Current Members](http://wiki.km4dev.org/KM4Dev_Futures:_Interviews_with_Current_Members) . The interview questions I used to guide the interviews may be found under the *Discussion* tab.

Method Used to Select Interviewees

I based my initial selection of members to interview from the early responses John D Smith received from the questionnaire he sent out to Current and Past Core group members, attendees from the Seattle face-to-face, and the Escort group identified in the Durham-Law SNA ([http://wiki.km4dev.org/The KM4Dev experience as a context for thinking about its future](http://wiki.km4dev.org/The_KM4Dev_experience_as_a_context_for_thinking_about_its_future)). Having already shown interest in assisting in the KM4Dev self-reflection effort, these members were deemed the most likely to (1) respond to a request for an interview and (2) want to expand on their short written responses in an open conversation.

In addition, interviewees were selected with an effort to balance out the range of perspectives collected. I sent invitations out to 9 members who have had different roles within KM4Dev, different tenure lengths within the group, who work and live in different regions of the world, and who pay attention to different interaction spaces (e.g., Dgroups, Ning Network) hosted by KM4Dev. I completed six interviews capturing this range of perspectives.

Synthesizing the Interviews

The first members to respond to my call for an interview were members who are active in the KM4Dev network and have been for a long period of time. This is not surprising, given each member's investment of time and energy into KM4Dev related activities over the years. The average membership length for my first three interviewees--Ewen LeBorge, Johannes Schunter, and Nancy White—is 9.3 years (KM4Dev is approximately 13 years old). Nancy is the only member I interviewed with the institutional memory of a time (prior to 2004) when KM4Dev had a paid moderator to handle the administration of KM4Dev. Both Ewen and Nancy have experience with being a member of the KM4Dev Core group. All three members regularly attend face-to-face events (\bar{X} = 5.3).

The last three members to respond to my call for an interview spend considerably less time each month on KM4Dev related activities. Both Lisette and Piers have been working in the field of development and knowledge management for many years; Kristie is new to the field. Both Kristie and Piers have been members for less than year, while Lisette has been a member for nine years. The Seattle face-to-face was the first face-to-face event for each of these members.

Commonalities among the Most Active Members

All three of the senior members expressed continuous learning as the main benefit they receive through their participation in KM4Dev. Connecting with other practitioners in an “open space” environment provides both Ewen and Johannes with a way to express their professional identity, while Nancy enjoys interacting with other members so much that she finds she often censures her own participation to keep from dominating an online conversation.

Both Nancy and Johannes expressed frustration with the responsiveness of Core Group members to their offers to assist KM4Dev in a specific way. Interestingly, both of their offers revolved around funding. Nancy reported that she has offered to pay for the expenses associated with the Wiki and Ning platforms for 1 year while members deliberate/explore ways of funding these overhead costs in the future. Johannes has also offered, several times, to “work with” other interested members on piloting a crowd-funding initiative. Both Nancy and Johannes felt that their offers were met with silence from the Core.

My knowledge of the Core Group and their thoughts on funding lead me to believe that these offers were met with silence because there were no members of the Core who were willing to spear-head such an undertaking at that time. Funding is a complex thing. Perhaps members of the Core felt that these adhoc offers of help would create a patchwork strategy for funding KM4Dev. The presence of the IFAD funding represented a clear opportunity to think about a comprehensive funding strategy, it may have also disrupted the “let’s try it” spirit of KM4Dev. A spirit that both Johannes and Nancy sense is not burning as brightly as it once did within the group.

Commonalities among the Less Active Members

The three less active interviewees, Lissette, Kristie, and Piers, spend their energy listening rather than interacting with the group. However, they each have different ways of listening. The Seattle face-to-face event was well received by all three, and it affected how they relate to the group. Each of these members noted how the experience gave them a greater sense of what KM4Dev is all about. The face-to-face event gave both of the newer members, Piers and Kristie, a greater sense of trust in KM4Dev. In addition, the event seems to have energized these members. All three expressed a desire to increase their participation (i.e., spend more time as an active member) within KM4Dev over the next couple of years. In fact, both Lissette and Piers were impressed enough to begin thinking about how they could utilize their own knowledge of funding to help find funding for the group.

The most strikingly similar thing about these three members was their belief that they should be spending more time paying attention to KM4Dev. They believed they could reap greater benefits through deeper participation. In comparison to the active members I interviewed, who recounted the many ways they engage with KM4Dev, these members emphasized the difficulty they had finding the time in their already full work schedules to devote to KM4Dev related activities.

The lack of time they devoted to KM4Dev affected their overall understanding of how the group operated. None of these members were confident in their understanding of the administrative structure for KM4Dev, and they believed that any critique of the Core Group would be best handled by current Core Group members who are living the experience. However, both Lissette and Piers had advice for the

issue of burn out for members of the Core. They suggested a more normative Core Group experience by creating a more concrete job description (e.g., emphasizing important qualities of Core group members such as invested in the Community not just expected tasks), a set term limit, and a clear succession path for new members. They both saw this as a way for people to better manage their commitment, and it offers a formal means for people to recommit themselves if they want to extend their service.

Differences among the Most Active Members

Nancy has been around since the beginning. She has served on the Core group and transitioned back into the membership. She would be considered a “mature” member. Ewen and Johannes have been members for about the same amount of time. However, Ewen enjoys the deeper participation experience that membership on the Core group has brought him. He will soon depart the Core group because he would like to invest that energy into fostering greater regional participation where he works in Ethiopia. Ewen, it would seem, is at the pinnacle of his involvement. He actively takes strides to shape his own experience and the general culture/direction of KM4Dev. Johannes is not interested in the administration side of KM4Dev; he enjoys the learning and camaraderie he receives through active participation on the list, attendance at face-to-face events, and occasional project involvement. His participation pattern has been constant, and he does not foresee it changing.

All three members have a different perspective on the funding needs of KM4Dev. Johannes showed the most imagination when answering my question, “If you were to imagine what a budget for KM4Dev looks like, what would it include?” His budget looked more like an organization’s budget, which is reflected in the model of administration he described. However, he is also a realist and stated that he is happy with KM4Dev the way it is. In fact, he is not particularly interested in the administration of KM4Dev; it is not why or how he participates in the group. Ewen and Nancy are supporters of a bottom-up organization, where the membership drives the goals and actions of KM4Dev. They each estimated a modest, minimalist budget.

Differences among the Less Active Members

Lisette, Piers, and Kristie each have different methods for managing their participation experience within KM4Dev. Lisette, a veteran member, has a daily routine she has developed around the Dgroups posts that come through her inbox. In this way, she is similar to the other veteran members (Johannes, Nancy, Ewen). Kristie, who is both new to the field and KM4Dev, is still developing a routine for handling the daily messages that come to her inbox from KM4Dev. Finally, Piers just signed up for Dgroups. He is still figuring out the best way to connect with the group.

The other major difference among the less active members was their thoughts on a budget for KM4Dev. Piers described a budget that could fund a paid staff to handle the administration of the group. Lisette was keen on the group researching and debating the viability of achieving charitable status. She does not believe that achieving such status necessarily means that the culture of KM4Dev has to change. Finally, Kristie sees the value of having a paid moderator as part of the budget both for the group’s long-term sustainability and to give the Core Group time to do more mission-oriented work.

Final Thoughts

Each of these members has a different way of interacting with KM4Dev, which affects their perceptions of how KM4Dev is and could be administered. Everyone I interviewed could come up with at least two benefits they received from the way that they chose to participate. Interestingly, the less active members perceived that they could gain more benefits if they were more active. A face-to-face KM4Dev meeting was a pivotal moment in each of the interviewees' membership experience. These events ignited members' passion for the group and appear to instigate, for at least a portion of those who attend, a desire to become more active within the group. Although Nancy and Ewen did not explicitly list face-to-face events as a budget item, each of the other interviewees stressed the importance of the face-to-face meeting and finding funding for it.

Overall, speaking with these six members gave me the sense that talking about money and actions around it in concrete terms is difficult. Most of the members of KM4Dev are knowledge managers; their skill is interacting, organizing people, facilitating conversations, etc. The skill set of knowledge management professionals is not, necessarily, fundraising and the administration around it for a group such as KM4Dev. Therefore, their lack of action around this topic is understandable. It also seems to stem from a general lack of information. The sporadic communication around funding initiatives for the community is confusing for people and can foster a sense of distrust and frustration. It appears that there is a desire to know more so that an informed conversation can happen. For example, Lissette was excited to look for funding opportunities for the group, but once she found out it did not have charitable status she had no other way of channeling her excitement for the good of KM4Dev. If lack of information is the problem, a solution might be to organize a focused conversation, hosted by an expert of funding groups like KM4Dev, who could moderate and interject their expertise into a conversation based on the real funding needs of KM4Dev. [Lissette suggested the Foundation Center as a resource]

Arguably, such a conversation is not a simple event to choreograph. Wrapped up in the discussion of funding are questions of administration, organizations, power, and the culture of KM4Dev. Therefore, it is probably not a conversation that should be planned or hosted by one person. Still, having the Core group commit to a communication schedule around talking about the fundamental funding needs to technically keep KM4Dev operating would illuminate which members are interested in talking about (and perhaps acting on) the funding of KM4Dev. It would also allow for a structured space to compile, store, and share the budget of KM4Dev.

A final point, a main pattern that emerged from my interviews is the desire of these members to get involved in a different way than they have been. In other words, there is a lot of untapped potential in the KM4Dev membership. For example, Johannes would be willing to work on a crowd-funding committee. Lissette might be willing to look for funding. Piers would love to attend another face-to-face and possibly find funding for it. Kristie would love to be able to respond to other members inquiries for assistance. Nancy would like to help the group financially as people figure out the best funding solution. Ewen is excited to develop a more regional KM4Dev presence where he works. How can KM4Dev better manage this wealth of human capital?

There are clues in member actions and interactions that might illuminate this. For example, my suggestion to host a focused conversation, with hard facts, around funding in order to understand who in the membership is interested in acting on this issue speaks to this. Members who take the time to interact on a particular topic have, at the very least, knowledge on and interest in the topic. Similarly, members who attend a face-to-face event or respond to a Core group initiated survey show a level of investment that is greater than the always silent member. Therefore, it may be in the group's best interest to ground the network with stronger physical connections by creating some sort of member to member contact system. For instance, a best practice might evolve whereby after an event, focused conversation, etc. a member of the Core personally contacts participants to invite further participation. From my experience with this interview project, the people who responded to my call for participation (i.e., people who had already showed willingness to be involved by answering John's survey, cited above) were enthusiastic about volunteering their time to (1) help KM4Dev and (2) reflect on their own participation within KM4Dev. This final point is important. Professionals who willing volunteer their time and energy to help KM4Dev also see their own professional work benefiting from the volunteer experience.

~Melissa Bator
January 15, 2014