

Sharing knowledge among football managers across Europe

In 2005, UEFA has initiated a programme to enable all European national federations to cope with current challenges resulting from social and economic developments in the football environment. The underlying philosophy is that by giving better working tools to the middle management staff, the federations as a whole will gain in effective management and problem solving.

Instead of developing a classical educational approach with plenary courses, UEFA has chosen more practical methods, more directly orientated towards the federations' day-to-day challenges and towards knowledge sharing. Eventually, the programme aims at initiating a culture of networking and the development of communities of practice among the federations. The idea is also for federations to collectively being able to take advantage of one another's experiences. Hence, in addition to sharing knowledge in-between federations, the goal is also to develop collaborative working methods within the federation itself.

In order to implement these ideas, three principles were adopted. The first one is what we call *blended learning*. This means that we opt for a variety of ways to learn, so as to match the learners' diversity. The second principle is to make the project evolve in the *long term*. This means that rather than simply providing the participants with "one-shot educational courses", they are accompanied in their professional development. And the third principle is to innovatively *combine* practice and experiences stemming from the football world together with state-of-the-art theory in a domain (management, marketing, etc).

Knowledge sharing is rather easy to realise and motivating for participants. But to build on these exchanges in order to create good practices is more complex. Knowledge is unfortunately not something that can be collected directly from the exchanges and stocked on a shelf for others to use.

The idea is not to start with theory and then “apply the theory to the practice”. In fact, it should rather be the other way around. Starting by focusing on practical experiences and stories and then linking them to the theory available proves more efficient. The reason is because it is important to address first the needs found at the heart of the sport and ensuring that it represents the specificities of the sport. In other words, relevant knowledge must be both *contextual* and *embedded in practice*. More details about how knowledge management can benefit from a process involving people can be found in: Boder, A. (2006), “Collective Intelligence: A Keystone in Knowledge Management”, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Volume 10, Number 1, 2006 , pp. 81–93(13).

Implementing a knowledge sharing strategy

Having said that, how shall one start? How is it possible to forge a body of practices which would be useful for the managers and that would help develop and promote the sport? Well, the practice of *knowledge management* actually includes four steps: development, sharing, application and retention. This concept is borrowed and adapted from Nonaka, I., and Takeuchi, H. (1995), *The Knowledge-Creating Company*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. Each step is of significance as knowledge management is a process.

For example, if a federation develops a framework for a sponsorship strategy, the simple act of developing the product is not enough. Once the framework has been developed, it needs to be shared with various parties to ensure that a variety of different experiences are included in its development. Then, the piece of knowledge resulting from this process must be validated by applying it and using it. It must then be closely monitored and constantly updated to remain pertinent and useful. The secret is to consider these steps as a circle always to be improved. Knowledge and evolution go hand in hand.

The trick is to implement the principles stated above by designing a scenario allowing members of federations to share information and knowledge. The scenario allows for a variety of methods and ways to access knowledge and to compare between practices. It basically includes four pillars represented in the diagram.

Seminars serve to provide basic knowledge in a specific field. Each session is based upon a simple concept packaged in the following manner. Stories and experiences stemming from the football world are put forward. From them, lessons learned are made explicit by experts, and they are discussed and compared with other elements of knowledge. This generates good practices which will later be implemented by the federations. The scenario is then reorganised on the on-line platform.

Typically a seminar or a workshop includes three phases which give participants a thread to follow: an awareness phase to get to know the various challenges in a given domain; an analysis phase to go more in-depth into a specific issue; and an implementation phase to make the link between what they learned and their actual work.

In this scenario, the role of domain experts is essentially to trigger the important aspects and to reformulate participants' issues and challenges. Simulations of real life situations as well as analysis of video clips are also extensively used in the working sessions. In addition, more specific methods are used, such as for instance the Metaplan technique (a structured and visual discussion technique), which is a tool used for clustering ideas stemming from a working group.

The follow-up process then serves to turn the lessons learned into good practices to be implemented. It consists in regrouping participants in communities of practices according to their interests and projects. Each community interacts through virtual meetings and receives the support of various experts from the field studied.

A new approach to “distance learning”

Distance learning (E-learning) is a major pillar in the process. It is a way to network participants, course material and experts into a recurrent interaction. The key point in the scenario is that it is not a bipolar interaction between learners and teachers. It is based upon a combination of both an on-line knowledge platform including extensive videos from casestudies and accessible by participants and a virtual meeting platform to support distance interaction between several participants and experts.

The on-line knowledge platform also includes story-telling modules, which is an excellent method to trigger the participants' attention and motivation and to link the theoretical ideas with a concrete case. Basically, a storytelling session consists in the presentation of the story, followed by a process where lessons learned from the story are extracted and then reapplied to other situations.

Educating people or developing practices for professionals?

In a socially and economically changing domain like football, it is worth standing back for a while and asking what is best for the development of the sport. Having skilled and talented people is clearly a major asset, as it is the only way to face the unpredictable challenges coming ahead. Therefore, education is one way to go. Having said that, and because football requires quick, tailor-made and concrete solutions to face urgent problems, another strategy is to develop good practices.

But, are we actually talking about one and the same strategy or are there two conceptually different ideas? In a programme like the one described above, are we “educating” people or are we developing good practices for practitioners? The answer to this question requires a small detour to consider how knowledge develops overtime, how it is progressively validated and how the learning process goes about.

If we consider the learning process of the society overtime, we have a progressive evolution. This tells us that the society as a whole progressively grows its knowledge. The knowledge goes through various validating processes and is then widely accepted by everyone. Now, at an individual level, the traditional scenario is to pass on elements of this core knowledge to students, who go through a learning process and finally are in a position to apply what they learned. This can be pictured by the following diagram.

There are two difficulties with such a scenario. One is that knowledge is not really just “passed on” to students. In fact they assimilate the knowledge with their own pre-existing ideas, themselves depending partly on their environment. Another difficulty is that when knowledge is “applied”, it generally needs to be adapted to a specific context via the development of practices. Therefore, knowledge is something that can be neither transferred easily, nor implemented immediately.

This conclusion shows us one simple thing. The process of acquiring knowledge (through education and learning) and the process of applying knowledge in the professional world need to be considered as an integrated one, described by the schema below.

According to this view, practitioners (but you could call them students as well) take bits and pieces of the core of validated knowledge, create and share new practices as a group (not just as individuals). As a result this knowledge is collected and organized somewhere temporarily (it could be orally or in the form of draft documents or in a knowledge base such as in our project). As the knowledge sharing process goes ahead, this core of practices is progressively refined until it is eventually validated and accepted by all. It is easy to see that what is at stake here are both an individual and collective learning process as well as a knowledge creating and sharing process, embedded within each other.

As a result, the question of whether one should encourage either education or else knowledge sharing vanishes. It shall be both by definition. The question is rather one of balancing the various parameters to make the process an efficient one. Namely, one shall provide enough basic and validated knowledge, so as not to reinvent the wheel overtime. One shall allow for a good equilibrium between individual and collective learning. Finally, one shall make sure that the needs are made explicit in a particular domain, so as to focus on the right practices to improve and refine.

Going back to our project, this scenario translates into basically two pillars interacting with each other. The process within communities drawing from basic knowledge provided during seminars and yielding practices back into more targeted workshops, where participants focus on specific issues; and the knowledge on-line platform which collects the knowledge in an organised and visual form for participants to re-utilise overtime.



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Résumé

Deutsch

2005 hat die UEFA ein Programm lanciert, das sich an das mittlere Fussballmanagement wendet und Tools zur Verfügung stellen soll, mit denen besser auf die sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Veränderungen im Umfeld des Fussballs reagiert werden kann. Das Programm verfolgt einen pragmatisch-praktischen Ansatz und setzt auf Wissensaustausch und Networking. Das Knowledge Management durchläuft vier Phasen: In einer ersten Phase wird Wissen generiert/entwickelt. In der Regel passiert das im Rahmen von Seminarien und Workshops. Angesichts der Distanzen werden diese Anlässe oft «virtuell» durchgeführt. Nach der Entwicklung des Wissens wird es mit anderen geteilt und unter Beizug von Experten systematisiert und organisiert. Als Tool steht hier eine Onlineplattform zur Verfügung, die ständig ausgebaut und verfeinert wird. Ziel ist es letztendlich, das so gewonnene, verfeinerte, organisierte und in einer Wissensdatenbank zur Verfügung gestellte Wissen in Good Practice umzumünzen.

Français

En 2005, l'UEFA a lancé un programme destiné au middle management et mis à disposition des outils qui permettent aux responsables de mieux réagir aux changements sociaux et économiques qui interviennent dans le domaine du football. Le programme suit une approche pragmatique et mise sur l'échange de connaissances et la mise en réseau des acteurs. La gestion des connaissances se déroule en quatre phases. Dans un premier temps, le savoir est généré/développé, en général dans le cadre de séminaires et d'ateliers. Etant donné les distances qui séparent les acteurs, ces «réunions» sont souvent virtuelles. Il s'agit ensuite de partager ces connaissances avec les autres, de les systématiser et de les organiser en faisant appel à des experts. L'outil mis à disposition dans ce contexte est une plate-forme online, développée et affinée en permanence. Le but est en fin de compte de mettre à disposition les connaissances ainsi acquises dans une banque de données organisée et facilement utilisable.