IMARK

Module
Investing in Information for Development

Information Strategy

Lesson 3: Implementing an Information Strategy

Learner Notes

Table of contents

This lesson is part of the IMARK Module on "Investing in Information for Development". The Module contains six units. The unit on "Information Strategy" comprises three lessons:

Lesson 1: The Features of an Information Strategy

Lesson 2: Developing an Information Strategy

Lesson 3: Implementing an Information Strategy

This course is available in self-paced e-learning format on CD-ROM and the Internet (www.imarkgroup.org).

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- define the potential **benefits** and the possible **risks** of various approaches to **implementing** your strategy;
- be aware of the need to **communicate** your new strategy effectively.

Introduction

Suppose you have developed your Information Strategy and have produced a document which seeks to persuade stakeholders of the vision of where you want to go and the issues you need to address in order to get there. The document describes your research and analysis, and also includes your conclusions and recommendations.

Now it is finally time to **implement** your strategy, and to **communicate** it effectively.

Doing everything yourself?

During the strategic analysis, you may have realized that the range of options and alternatives was so large that it was impossible to include everything in the strategy.

The best way of solving this problem, as discussed in the previous two lessons, is:

- to include in your strategic planning the **determination of priorities**; and then
- to **select activities** according to those priorities.

Once you have set your priorities and defined your strategy, you could still recognize that it might be very hard to implement the strategy all by yourself.

You could therefore use an approach which spreads the responsibility for the implementation of the activities across a range of stakeholders. This approach involves mobilizing all staff, and even some other organizations, to **engage** and **participate** in the implementation, and to **exchange information** with each other.

It usually involves two types of activities:

OUTSOURCING:
Agreements in which you pay another organization to undertake a defined range of tasks.

SHARING TASKS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS (partnerships and affiliations):
These can be formal or informal collaborative arrangements with other organizations. Such arrangements may involve payment, but they generally include contributions financed by the partners themselves.

For example, one organization might prepare bulletins with information on the current availability of pesticides, and another might prepare bulletins with information on fertilizers. They may agree to share the information at no cost.

The risks of cooperation

Outsourcing and partnerships can be effective. However, they also carry risks.

Apart from the possibility of practical, day-to-day non-compliance, two more strategic problems can emerge:

- loss of strategic capacity; and
- loss of strategic position.

As an example of a loss of strategic capacity, read what these two staff members have to say:

here is what happened...we started by outsourcing some simple repetitive tasks, like entry of data into databases. We chose an outside organization with specialist staff and equipment, and they did the job faster and cheaper. However, when we went a step further and outsourced our entire IT management ...we totally lost the capacity to judge...

...finally, when it was time to renew the contract, we no longer had the expertise to assess whether we were being offered the right technology at the right price...or the capacity to manage a transfer of the work to another agency if we needed to...

The second problem we mentioned is loss of strategic position. For instance, it could result from some arrangement for the sharing of expertise: there is always the possibility that the aspect of information upon which you become dependent attains more prominence.

As an example, here is what these members of staff are saying:

...we had this agreement with another research institute: they would develop a website on crop disease control and we would contribute results of our studies on pests to their website...

...but web-based systems suddenly became a hot political issue... with generous funds available for further development. Unfortunately, because of our arrangement, we had no claim to organizational expertise in website development...

Other risks are possible when building partnerships and networks:

Inability to create reciprocity.

Partnerships and networks work if the organizations which contribute also **receive the benefits** that they expect. The partnership will not work if one partner considers it simply as a cheap way to obtain information or services, without being prepared to contribute what the other partners want.

Inability to build trust.

Partnerships need to be based on clear agreements. Partners need to understand, share and respect specific rules.

This should prevent problems such as:

- unequal sharing of information and plans;
- individual members making claims on behalf of the whole;
- disagreements about copyright or plagiarism; and
- arguments about governance of the affiliation.

Minimizing the risks

How is it possible to minimize and prevent the risks we just mentioned?

When organizations agree to join a partnership or to participate in a network, they should be clear – first to themselves and then among each other – as to **the conditions and the rules** of the partnership they are about to enter into..

For this purpose, organizations should preferably use **formal agreements**, **codes of conduct** or other written instruments.

Therefore, when you participate in a partnership or a network, you should know:

· why you are joining;
· why the other parties are involved and to what extent they are getting what they expected;
· what level of commitment is required in terms of time and resources;
· how formal the organizational commitments are;
· the arrangements for the governance and the management of the partnership;
· the terms of confidentiality and/or copyright of information exchanged or produced by the partnership;
· how any partner can leave the partnership, including expectations of notice periods, consultation and openness about future plans.

Communicating your strategy

Once you have decided how to implement your strategy, it will be time to communicate the strategy and the changes that it calls for – informing staff and stakeholders about the reasons for changes and about what the new strategy is trying to achieve.

The goal is to communicate the changes in such a way that they are relevant to the goals of your strategy, and are carried out efficiently by staff. Their involvement, therefore, is extremely important.

There are at least four reasons for communicating your strategy effectively, and each reason will affect the message that is communicated:

1. **End uncertainty**.

Your management colleagues, junior staff and key external stakeholders have probably become aware that some review process is under way. All sorts of rumours or worries may have surfaced and will be circulating. Of course, the more open you have been with the process, the fewer rumours there will be.

Everyone who might be affected by the new strategy will welcome a clear statement about what is proposed, even if they do not like its content.

2. **Communicate strategic goals**.

One of the main purposes of a strategy is that staff understand what your organization is trying to achieve and what its priorities are. As a consequence, it is important that this understanding inform their own work. If people are not told – and told clearly – what the strategy is, they will not be able to contribute to implementing the strategy.

3. **Achieve its political potential**.

Since a strategy is a statement of where you – your department or organization – want to go, it is a **"political"** document. You want other stakeholders, and especially other parts of your own organization, to take your plans into account when making theirs. Ideally, you want them to feel that because your strategy is widely known and discussed, it should not be ignored.

In this context, the more people who have openly participated in developing your strategy, the higher its profile will be – and the harder it will be to ignore.

4. **Promote your organization**.

The launch of a new strategy – even for just part of your organization's work, like its information activities – is an opportunity to draw attention to what you and your organization is trying to achieve. It is a far better and more dynamic opportunity than amending the target figures in the third year of a five-year plan.

Your organization will have invested a lot of professional skill and effort in the strategic planning process – why not get some credit for it?

Summary

If during the implementation of your Information Strategy you realize that the number of activities to carry out is high, you can: select priorities and carry out the activities according to these priorities; and get other people to do work for you, or exchange information with you.

You have two options if you don't want to do everything yourself: outsourcing; or sharing tasks with other organizations (partnerships, networks and other affiliations).
Among the main risks of these options are loss of strategic position and loss of capacity. However, you can minimize these risks through formal agreements, codes of conduct or other written instruments.

It is important to **communicate** your Information Strategy effectively. By doing so, you will:

1) end uncertainty;
2) communicate strategic goals;
3) establish your strategy's value; and
4) promote yourself and your organization.