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Workshop encourages knowledge management

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Battle Command Knowledge System

"If you build it, they will come" according to the famous line in the movie Field of Dreams. Not necessarily so, as facilitators of Army online professional forums were reminded during a recent weeklong workshop to sharpen their collaboration skills.

Hosted by the Battle Command Knowledge System at the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, the workshop provided an opportunity for both new and experienced forum leaders and facilitators to share insights and experiences about knowledge management and how to enable Soldiers to connect through the online communities. Workshop members listened to guest speakers, shared experiences and participated in practical exercises about techniques and skills for managing forum conversations.

Army professional forums are online spaces for leaders to create and share their knowledge and experience. The forums offer the opportunity to connect with other community members to focus on professional development and job performance in a specific practice, such as operations officer or commander, or a functional area, such as logistics or intelligence. The forums are similar to civilian communities of practice but with more structure, facilitation and a clear link to supporting the organization's mission. The workshop helped identify and transfer best practices for creating and moderating conversations among the facilitators and community leaders in attendance.

"Eighty percent of what we use on the job today we learn informally," said retired Lt. Col. Mike Prevou, BCKS Knowledge Network Division chief. "The forums offer the Army a new way of structuring and maximizing that informal learning opportunity while building a sense of community identity and trust. Army professional forums are transformational. They are the beginning of a revolutionary shift based on Web 2.0 capabilities. They are moving us into the next generation of learning."

"First and second generation knowledge management currently used by the Army is no longer sufficient to win the learning competition required of an Army at war," said BCKS Director Col. James Galvin. "The next generation of KM focuses on collaboration and this workshop helped us build collaboration skills across the force. The workshop members were able to take what someone else is doing and tailor it to their forum."

Facilitators support the Army communities and knowledge networks by helping people find what they need, connecting them with subject matter experts and conducting professional dialogue to help solve problems. Joining the group of more than 40 Defense contractors, Department of the Army civilians and leaders from across the country were two Air Force officers from the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., who run the Air Force's online professional forum, "Commander's Connection."

Richard McDermott, a consultant on designing knowledge organizations and building communities of practice, reminded workshop attendees that the key role of facilitators is connecting the members of their network to both the knowledge they need and experts in their community that can help them. McDermott commented that trust is the glue that

holds communities together. Just as physical teams develop trust so must these virtual communities. Being able to go to one source for knowledge about a particular topic can help deal with the daily information overload of data and messages from the Internet, radio, television, text messaging and newspapers.

"And it won't be getting better anytime soon," McDermott said. "Technical knowledge has doubled every 12 years - by 2010, technical knowledge will double every 72 hours versus the 18-month rate in 2006."

Representatives from the Army's CompanyCommand Forum, including one of its founders, Lt. Col. Tony Burgess, conducted one day of the workshop. One of the Army's earliest forums, Company-Command is a grassroots forum for former, current and future company commanders to connect and share ideas and experiences.

"The first thing we learn about KM is that it is about people and that the ability of community leaders to facilitate, lead and moderate a discussion is paramount to creating and capturing knowledge that is in our heads and sharing it with others so they can learn from others' experiences," said Dr. Rick Morris, program manager, Computer Sciences Corporation, which conducts BCKS for the Army. "The counterinsurgency war we are engaged in is a learning competition - those who learn the fastest will prevail. Knowledge networks provide a powerful weapon in the Army's effort to out-think, out-learn and defeat adversaries."

BCKS hosts 80 online professional forums with more than 92,000 members. The forums help Soldiers and leaders learn better and faster.

"What are the tools I need to do my job? Where do I find them? How do I get that experience? How do I share what I know with other Soldiers doing a similar job? These questions are at the heart of what being a facilitator is all about: How do I help my peers learn faster and perform better?" Prevu said.

BCKS and the Combined Arms Center provide the software and servers on which the professional forums are run, as well as KM training courses, KM doctrine development, KM handbooks, knowledge assessments, digital storytelling methods, tailored knowledge centers, a network of KM advisors and assistance in designing and developing professional forums.

KM trainers from BCKS travel across the Army to provide training and education on KM best practices. An 18-hour curriculum called "KM Bootcamp" prepares brigade and division KM cells to function as working KM organizations.

BCKS creates online knowledge centers as a collaboration tool to link unit headquarters with subordinate units to exchange knowledge and participate in other online discussions. The password-protected sites are accessible worldwide from anywhere there is an Internet connection.

The workshop leaders reminded participants that the size of a forum is not important - the quality of the conversations, energy of topic leaders, exchange of knowledge and the ability of the forum to meet the needs of that community is what's important.

"If there is one thing I have learned in the seven years I have been doing this is that knowledge management, learning and performance is about people. If we invest the time in developing, capturing and sharing our best practices, we will truly become a coaching organization capable of winning the learning competition" Prevu said.

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