

Devon County Council – Knowledge Hub Case Study

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Abstract

Starting with the development of a social media policy Devon County Council has been using social media to innovatively engage with young people including pregnant teenage mothers, to enhance their corporate and library websites and to improve internal collaboration. An internal business networking pilot project that is estimated to have made savings of £15,500 and significantly reduced the volume of email traffic would, if applied across the Council, save £750,000 each year. While Devon have been improving the social media skills of staff, they would like to use the Knowledge Hub to further improve learning across the organisation (which has 23,000 staff delivering 800 different services) and to provide aggregated information for specific professional groups such as social workers.

Case Study (1,793 words)

Background to Knowledge Hub and use of social media in Local Government

Social media allows users to share information and opinions and to interact online in a many-to-many model of communication. Social media applications involve the building of online communities to encourage participation. A number of new social media applications have emerged in the last five years including social networking sites such Facebook and Twitter and content sharing websites such as YouTube. Usage has grown very rapidly. To exploit these new opportunities for communication and interaction Local Authorities are increasingly using social media tools with one third now using Twitter (35%) and RSS news feeds (32%) and one sixth using Facebook (17%) and YouTube (16%).

To further develop their online learning offer IDeA proposes to develop a Knowledge Hub that builds on the success of IDeA's Communities of Practice which have 55,000 members. The Knowledge Hub will allow local government to produce and capture its own knowledge more directly and bring together more relevant content sources including blogs and twitter feeds.

Devon County Council's use of social media

Devon County Council aspires to make the best use of the available technology and innovations to improve the way they do business. This includes the use of social media to communicate, reach out and interact with the different communities they service. While their approach to date has been experimental, the Council is now in the process of developing a corporate communications and engagement strategy that includes social media.

While Devon County Council have taken a bottom up, active learning approach to piloting the use of various social media tools, the starting point has been the development of a corporate social media policy and user guidelines. The guidelines help managers and employees to consider a range of issues before participating in or developing any new social media application and help them to make the most of the tools available while protecting themselves and the Council. The guidelines cover:

- The personal responsibilities when making use of social media
- The professional responsibilities when making use of social media as a Devon County Council employee
- How to act as a contributor or publisher
- How to act as moderator for an online community

Working with a youth participation worker Devon County Council undertook research and completed an initial pilot using Facebook and Bebo to improve their interaction with young people (see below). As well as developing new ways to promote their youth services and engage with young people the learning from this pilot was used to reinforce changes in corporate policy.

Devon's Approach to Youth Participation using Social Networking

As many young people were already networking using social media Devon County Council wanted to explore whether this was a new way to engage young people in the promotion and evaluation of the Council's youth services.

To research young people's views on participation through social networking sites, Devon County Council attended Kongomana, an annual youth festival. Some 94% of young people said they would be interested in engaging with a social networking site for participation and 80% said they would be likely to share opportunities with their friends. While young people would welcomed social networking participation opportunities they wanted safe, formal and official websites. In the end Devon County Council developed a new website, Get Ur Voice Heard (<http://geturvoiceheard.co.uk>) which was linked to Facebook and Bebo pages and connected to the local Youth Parliament.

As part of the youth participation project Devon also operated a private Facebook group for teenage pregnant mothers. Rather than having to meet in a more formal

setting at a specific time the approach allowed flexible engagement around parental commitments with time for reflection outside the confines of a meeting. As the approach was in many ways a meeting that could go on for a week it was found to be liberating and empowering for the users.

Devon County Council has also used social media in a number of other ways:

- Devon County Council has integrated their website with Twitter and Facebook, use Vimeo to share their videos and offer RSS newsfeeds for planning information, news and webcasts.
- Devon's libraries use Twitter, flickr and Facebook to promote their services and run an annual competition to identify images from their archives.
- Devon County Council's CEO produces an internal blog and podcasts.
- Devon County Council has also completed an internal pilot of business networking and collaboration using social software (bluekiwi) to consider the business case of the product as a learning tool.

What have the impacts of social media been?

Devon County Council believes that the use of social media tools has been valuable but they have not yet been able to fully quantify the impacts and the benefits. In terms of usage Devon County Council has nearly 1,600 followers on Twitter, has 69 fans on Facebook and has uploaded 9 videos to Vimeo. The Council has noted positive responses from residents around the conversation developed using Twitter and the local elections increased usage of social media.

With about 800 different services the Council has concluded that they need to engage users around specific services or initiatives so not to overload users with information. For example Devon's libraries have their own Twitter, Facebook and flickr pages.

The Council has found that externally their use of social media has been complementary to their existing communications channels rather than replacements. Additional staff resource over and above that required for just publishing website content has been required to maintain these new channels and the conversations that often take place outside office hours.

However, internally the Council believe that social media tools can replace current ways of working. For example, the Council's internal pilot of a social media platform replaced the outlook distribution lists that were used for sending information to teams and groups. The new approach allowed staff to keep track of a conversation, join and leave when they wanted to and to be able to see the entire chain of comments. As a result the volume of emails fell from 400-500 to 70-80 across a team of eight people and the quality of the conversation was improved. Further savings were also

achieved by the team due to a reduction in physical face-to-face meetings. The Council has made a conservative estimate that the reduction in email and meetings helped the team to save £15,500 a year. If applied across the whole Council the time saved when looking for information is estimated to be worth over £750,000 each year.

The Council also believes that these tools can help with Freedom of Information requests as, for example, searching is much easier across the social media platform than across many individual mailboxes, where information has often been archived or deleted.

By using externally hosted software Devon County Council has been able to minimise the requirements placed on their internal IT team. For a social media pilot that lasted 11 months and included 250 users there were no calls to the IT help desk.

By working with their service directorates Devon County Council has been learning about social media applications and changing policy to become more explicit about the business risks and issues. They are also learning about what values, measures and outputs are required for a sustainable engagement and what are the resource implications of using social media.

What have been the barriers and challenges in using social media?

The biggest initial challenge was developing the skills and competencies of staff so they were able to have a conversation on a site like Twitter. To get value from using social media the Council have been developing an online corporate voice and persona for their different services. Online participation skills have been developed internally first to identify the training needs before engaging in a more formal and external civic debate across a large county.

Other barriers and challenges have included:

- The limitations imposed by the use of Internet Explorer Version 6 as the default corporate browser. To make effective use of all websites staff have had to be given access to other browsers such as Firefox and Opera. In the longer term if some of the piloted social networking software was adopted by the Council there would be a need to integrate login and authentication approaches.
- The need to raise awareness of the potential for social media in some service directorates and across their management teams.
- The need to have the staff resource to maintain the new channels such as Twitter to make them sustainable in the long term.

How is learning and sharing of good practice undertaken?

Devon County Council would like to improve their sharing of good practice and learning. They would like to have a better formal documentation of learning points and use business networking as a way to learn while they are doing a project rather than through reflective learning at the end of the project. Real time access to learning from, for example, other social workers around the country would be a huge benefit for the social care workers in Devon.

The Council's approach to social media training was organic. An informal "social media forum" was set up to allow staff to share learning and to ask each other about the best ways to use particular tools. There were no formal social media training packages available at that time.

The Future: How the Knowledge Hub could help Devon County Council

Currently it is difficult for an officer to get hold of the latest news, connect to other councils, obtain Local Government analysis and source industry issues for their specialist area (e.g. Corporate IT Management). Devon County Council would like the Knowledge Hub to bring together a diverse collection of information from a wide range content sources such as blogs, bookmarks, news cuttings, video and online conversations and filter them on to a dashboard. It is about bringing together the wider body of knowledge for specific professionals.

A challenge for the Knowledge Hub will be its ability to engage a organisation which is the scale of Devon County Council with 23,000 employees but with only 6,500 on their corporate network. The software will need to cope with any email address and be available through other mobile devices and outside work hours.

For the future Devon County Council are looking into how they could develop an online Digital Passport training package which would cover risk management, online media training, community management and online facilitation/moderation, evaluation and measures and social media tools (such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, flickr and blogs) all with a focus on business usage. Linked to the training but also available separately, Devon are considering whether they should develop good practice guides around particular social media sites and tools.

Further Information

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Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Exeter-United-Kingdom/Devon-County-Council/58537602589>

Vimeo <http://www.vimeo.com/user1525485/videos>

Devon libraries flickr site <http://www.flickr.com/photos/devonlibraries/>

Bluekiwi <http://www.bluekiwi-software.com/>

Get Ur Voice Heard <http://geturvoiceheard.co.uk/> and linked Facebook pages <http://www.facebook.com/geturvoiceheard>

IDeA's Communities of Practice <http://www.communities.idea.gov.uk/welcome.do>

Knowledge Hub www.local.gov.uk/knowledgehub