
IT'S ALL ABOUT THE HOW

Karen Hampson



Experience Capitalization is a relatively new term, but it covers similar principles to documentation or process evaluation. For me, Experience Capitalization is the *HOW*: in terms of “how are we doing things,” “how did we get to where we wanted to get,” and of “how did some aspects of a project work well and some not so well.”

Cover Examining what we did, and why we did it that way

Right A planning session with project partners

Much of conventional M&E is around measuring impacts – as part of my work at Farm Radio International (FRI) I spend a lot of time working on log frames and indicators, trying to measure impact, and a lot less time trying to measure how we got that impact in the first place and whether it is actually a logical progression from activity to outcome. An experience capitalization process differs in the sense that, when you ask teams to assess how they did things or whether they did them well, they will usually think in terms of numbers or outputs, rather than processes. In that sense, a lot of useful detail can be lost.

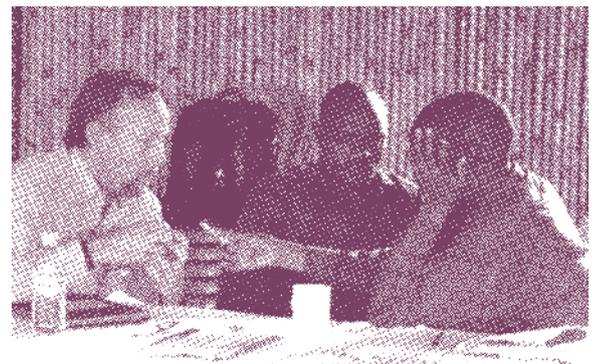
Because EC is focusing more on what you’ve done and how you’ve done it, some people find it difficult at first to work out how to assess and share important observations with others. It’s sometimes difficult to say, “Maybe our organisation didn’t do this right” when it’s easier to say, “Our organisation planted 400 trees.”

A useful assessment of programme processes

Sometimes, organisations just carry on doing what they are doing and never make a change in their methodology. In a sense, if your project is getting a result that you want, then you can argue that you’re doing the right things. But it’s very rare that that

happens because humans are messy and development is messy. It’s not linear, so Experience Capitalization is there to stop you making the same mistakes or, even if you didn’t make any mistakes, you can still ask what you might do differently next time: “Could we involve more people?” or, “Could we have looked at something differently?” or, “As it was so successful, could we have aimed at a bigger target?” It’s trying to encourage a process of learning or trying to do better.

Sometimes things will happen that you hadn’t planned for, a good result that you hadn’t put any activities in place to achieve, for example – so you need to ask “How did that happen?” If it’s a positive thing you need to find out how it happened so that you can do it again: FRI had a project where we were





trying to get women's voices onto the radio. We set up a seemingly simple system where women could record their voices and messages on a smart phone and send them to a radio station, where they could be downloaded and inserted directly into next week's radio programme. However, what we thought was straightforward actually had a fairly significant knock-on effect in terms of gender-division of labour in households: men were suddenly realising that women were doing a lot more work than they had previously realised, and then they started going out to help women in the fields.

This was a major result that we hadn't aimed at. So then we tried to track back: how did that happen, what were the factors that caused these apparent successes? Sometimes it's just human nature and the way things happen, and sometimes the specific catalyst can be found. But looking for the causal pathway means that you can do things intentionally next time.

Experience capitalization and its effect on the way we work

Some people can at first find it difficult to grasp the concepts and do the necessary self-reflection to gain a successful result. But it's important to try, as you have to be open to looking for any mistakes and finding

ways of self-improvement in order to learn and progress. Often people only truly appreciate this EC process when they see the end product. It's only when you've been through the painful process – of examining what you've done and why you've done it, what went well and what didn't – that you realise how useful the exercise is. Reflection can be the best source of innovation.

After joining the meeting CTA organised in Rome, in October 2016, I started writing an EC component into some of our projects as a deliverable milestone. Colleagues have found it to be very useful. In fact, it has helped in a couple of instances to get a second phase of a project. In one case, we wrote a short process evaluation into a multi-partner nutrition project. We ran a two-day workshop with all of the NGO partners sitting around a table, along with farmer representatives. We had to ask difficult questions: one partner will know what their own strengths are and what they found out, but another partner might not. So, when all the actors get together and ask difficult questions of both their own colleagues and of the wider team, the understanding of the roles of each project partner increases, as does the understanding of what each partner expected of others in the team.

The process increased the respect in which we held each other, because we could better see the

Above "What we thought was straightforward actually had a fairly significant knock-on effect"

Right EC is now a component in many FRI projects



difficulties and the successes that we'd all had. During implementation, we couldn't see the day-to-day efforts that everyone was making, because we couldn't necessarily appreciate the "big job" we'd all been doing. So a lot of positive feedback came out of the meeting and we were able to write a proposal for a second phase which was better tailored to our individual organisations' roles and skills, and what each of the partners wanted to gain from the project.

An essential part of the process, or icing on the cake?

Experience Capitalisation is a very useful process, but with ever-squeezed budgets it can be seen as an add-on to be cut when there is not enough money. However, when done well, it should produce two or three key recommendations for future projects.

FRI has invested a fair amount of time in developing EC in projects, in terms of how the process can be done through the radio or how it can be done to support our radio-based projects. Through that investment, it has grown in importance within the organisation. We have realised the importance of capturing short project learnings, so we have now started to encourage staff to write down their insights and ideas.

We've termed these *Insight Reports*, because they are quick to write, often striking, and sharing them is useful on many levels both within and outside our organisation.

And it's with these short *Insight Reports* that we feel we can capture the hearts and minds of: donors, both institutional and private, of organisations with which we can deliver the best projects – and, of course, of those who stand to benefit from our interventions.



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