

knowledge naturally

Natural England commissioned a knowledge story from Sparknow in the autumn of 2008. This case study outlines how we conducted the assignment, and then looks back from the autumn of 2010 at the difference the work has made.

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the challenge

Natural England uses a broad range of specialists to make informed decisions on how to conserve and enhance England's natural beauty.

Harnessing their expertise and that of its staff places knowledge at the heart of the organisation. Putting in place technological tools to manage and encourage knowledge sharing is one step.

Yet making the individual feel able to use those tools in their day-to-day work can present a challenge. Sparknow's brief was to develop an interactive presentation and set of scripts to provide a catalyst for employees to share their stories of knowledge at work, and in this way prompt Natural England to bring their knowledge strategy to life and to reinvigorate it.

'Like many organisations in the public sector, the most important thing is the people: making a knowledge strategy seem real to them is critical.'

Shiona Hastie | Natural England

beginnings

In broad terms our task was to bring life to Natural England's knowledge charter through stories.

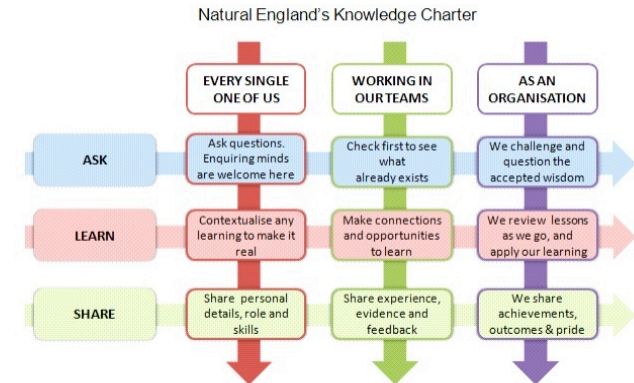
In September 2008, Natural England had developed an 'ask, learn and share' knowledge charter as part of its strategy for 2008-2014. Now they needed to help staff understand their part in making use of and sharing knowledge and, by implication, their role as active contributors to the collective knowledge resources of the organisation.

What hidden stories of the sometimes eclectic, often interesting work undertaken by their staff could be used as trigger stories of knowledge sharing in action?

'We wanted to catch the organisation at work almost when it was unaware that it was at work.'

Sparknow team member

We made a key design decision at the outset not to ask for knowledge but to ask people to record decisions. Natural England selected volunteer *knowledge journalists* from all levels of the organisation to keep *decision journals* for a week, recording their experiences of everyday situations that Natural Englanders may find themselves in: decision-making, problems, conversations with friends and colleagues.



draft invitation

Dear (target journalist),

Thank you for finding some time to work with Shiona Hastie and Barney Smith on developing the story of knowledge at Natural England. This is a small project, taking place between now and end November, whose purpose is to help identify the stories, conversation prompts, imagery and language that will help people from across Natural England start to live and breathe the Knowledge Charter, which is so essential to us achieving our Strategic Outcomes over the next five years. What's important is for us to tell the story through the eyes and ears of people at work on behalf of Natural England, rather than through abstract organisational plans and processes, which is why we're pleased you're willing to share your experiences with us.

solution

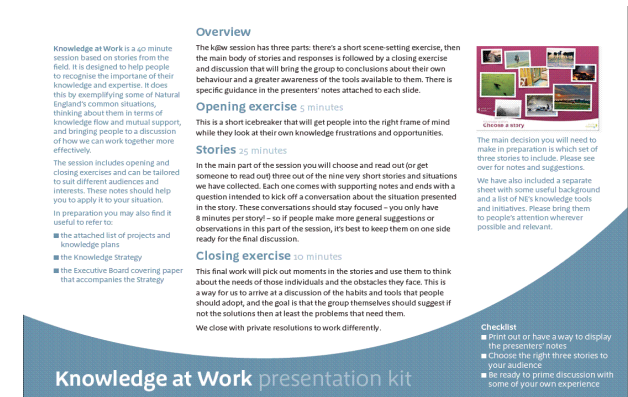
Drawing on these experiences we created a series of outline ‘trigger’ stories based on real narratives. They provide insight into how knowledge moves through the organisation.

By working closely with the *knowledge journalists*, Sparknow brought to the foreground stories of knowledge at work and the relationship between knowledge strategy and the individual.

The stories deal not only with the what happened in a given situation, (for example, the challenges presented in keeping track of constantly evolving policies) but also with how characters felt in relation to that (confused, bogged down). In this way, the stories acknowledge the emotional impact of work and examine how this influences knowledge at Natural England.

We used these stories to construct an interactive and engaging PowerPoint presentation with embedded sound clips. The presentation is used to run sessions that initiate frank conversations and invite people at every level in Natural England to share their experiences learn from others and ask for support when they need it.

The presentation includes prompts and scripts for those running the session to invite their audience to discuss their role at Natural England. It’s designed to have a subtle impact that brings about a fundamental shift in the way that people view the role of knowledge at work and their role in it; and to raise awareness about the tools available to help them really make knowledge move.



impact

We finished the work and went on to incorporate elements of it in other assignments. Then, one day...

We got to the point where we really did want to find out what happened next, how successful our work had been as a design for social construction of meaning around the charter.

By then (October 2010) a couple of years had passed, and Shiona was on maternity leave. So we spoke, instead, to Claire White, the project manager from the knowledge team.

It seems that the components (decision journals, briefing note, trigger stories in a presentation from which the manager could select a subset) have all been successful, although the product was introduced into the organisation at quite a rocky time.

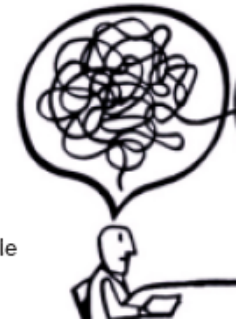
The briefing note and presentation were put onto shared drives and used locally by managers as we'd imagined, but not pushed out in the orchestrated way that we'd anticipated. The range of stories (from getting bums on seats in a parish hall to renegotiating the coastal boundary) has been good with many groups at illustrating the range of types of knowledge it takes to get the job done and good decisions made.

There's a little regret at the anonymity, a bit of hindsight about people wishing for recognition for the threads of their story to be known as theirs personally. At the same time, people agree that they wouldn't have signed up without the certainty of personal experiences being held in confidence. Done over again, it's likely that people would be braver about telling their stories in the first person.

DECISION JOURNAL

Welcome to the knowledge story project, and thank you very much for letting us experiment on you.

This book is yours, and it's for scribbling in. You have to keep it with you **all the time** while you work, but only for five days.



Part of picture visible | with thanks to the MLA knowledge transfer programme 20007 - 2010, who gave permission for it to be reused in this project.

The other surprise is how the method itself, almost more than the product, has stuck. The reflection process of keeping the journals, even for a period as brief as a week, had a profound effect on those who wrote them. It made them come to value quite differently the work that they did, simply by becoming more aware of it. In fact, the impact of the journals has been such that journals and diaries have been actively incorporated into the present, large-scale, knowledge transfer programme that Natural England is undertaking as part of its voluntary redundancy and early severance programme, following the comprehensive spending review.

‘A selection of knowledge transfer tools will be available, including opportunities for staff to record their working lifecycle in a journal/diary format.’

Claire White | Natural England

We at Sparknow had been confident this was a particularly good design in its simplicity, components and execution - marrying the best of intelligent design with a personal, human quality and witty and engaging processes and products. It's a pleasure to have seen the method stick at Natural England and become as useful in other business contexts as in the products that resulted from it.