SMARTER STATE CASE STUDIES

THE WORLD BANK: SKILLFINDER

This Expert Network Accelerates The Search For Talent

TALENT BANK

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BASIC INFORMATION

Owner

World Bank, World Bank Group Information and Technology Solutions

Project summary

An expert and talent network in an international development organization

Sector

Intergovernmental Organization

Audience

Employees, consultants, and alumni of the World Bank

Problem that it is trying to solve

It is difficult to identify and leverage expertise in a globally decentralized organization with hierarchical titles thereby increasing transaction costs to deploy talent in service of client needs.

Platform

WebSphere

Design basics

SkillFinder allows you to search for people within the World Bank Group using different criteria such as geography, specializations, projects and products. Personal expertise profiles are built with data from the user, from institutional records and endorsements.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

What's new?

Previously there was no database that catalogued the expertise of World Bank employees, so people could only rely on their personal networks when trying to find someone with a specific expertise for a project.

Incentives for participation

The incentive for an individual to complete his/her profile in SkillFinder is to showcase their expertise and build their professional network. This is made easy by auto-population of profiles.

The incentive for an individual to search for others in the platform is to accelerate the process of finding specific expertise to solve a problem or collaborators for projects.

Challenges

The platform is robust and well-developed but the leadership has not fully embraced it yet or conducted any experiments to test its efficiency at achieving the Bank's core mission.

Anticipated impact/Metrics

SkillFinder seeks to enable efficient knowledge and talent flows across a globally decentralized organization, accelerating the process of finding expertise within the institution. Some short term metrics of the Askwater pilot include response time, relevance of SkillFinder search results, overall satisfaction of operational teams and network creation. Long term metrics include improving the quality of projects (institutional portfolio ratings) and the evolution of standard approaches.

Why is this project interesting?

The magnitude of the employees involved (27,000) in this skills directory makes it a large experiment on capturing and searching for expertise, that can originate a wide variety of use cases.

It is capturing expertise from institutional data such as human resources data on previous projects and positions.

The World Bank is piloting the expert network within specific vertical (water) to understand the practical applications of the database.

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In the mid-eighteenth century, Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste D'Alembert began publishing their twenty-eight volume encyclopedia with contributions from Enlightenment greats such as Rousseau, Montesquieu and Voltaire. The Encyclopédie endeavored to categorize and widely disseminate secular knowledge systematically in order to shift people's thinking toward a secular Enlightenment worldview. It is perhaps fitting, therefore, that Pascal Saura, a former scholar of Diderot and professor of philosophy has been among those leading the charge at the World Bank to catalog and make searchable the know how of its 27,000 employees, consultants, and alumni.

Begun in 2014, SkillFinder is an online expert and talent network. Originally intended to help employees find internal project peer reviewers across the organization, like many tools however, SkillFinder has been "hacked." That is to say, in its first year of use, World Bankers are relying on the software more to find those they know to help with team building than to find those they don't know to conduct peer reviews. Managers and employees want to understand better the skills and skills gaps of those who sit across from them in order to inform their work plans.

In public institutions, especially, it is all too common for individual know-how to be masked by vague titles like manager and director. But, as Saura says[1], "titles don't speak, expertise does." Using software to give organizations greater access to insights about what their employees know—an accelerating practice[2] in the private sector where expert networking has taken off—has the potential to improve effectiveness and efficiency for public institutions as well.

What remains to be seen, however, is whether the Bank—one of the first major public institutions to deploy a company-wide expert network—can also leverage such data-driven tools to further its work[3] of ending extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity.

HOW SKILLFINDER WORKS

The World Bank's SkillFinder tracks expertise and experience across three dimensions: technical expertise, geography and clients, and business processes. Technical expertise includes items such as primary and secondary specialization, languages spoken, and publications. Geography and clients shows where someone has worked, with whom, and toward what end. Business processes includes products, project lifecycle, activities and roles.

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1   Pascal Saura, The World Bank Group's SkillFinder & Talent Marketplace: Delivering Global Solutions through an "Open Talent Economy", October 21, 2014. http://www.fintraininginnovations.com/presentations/october2014/Pascal%20Saura-World%20Bank%20Group-w.pdf

2   Beth Simone Noveck, *Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies of Expertise and the Future of Governing,* (Harvard University Press, 2015)

3   http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do
    * We would like to thank Pascal Saura, Senior Knowledge Management Officer at The World Bank, for his assistance.

The SkillFinder profile shows an employee's specialization, skills and languages.

In an effort to yield data about people that is both comprehensive and trustworthy, SkillFinder's personal expertise profiles are culled from three sources. The tool scrapes data from institutional records, such as human resources data about projects and credentials. This provides a source of authenticated, "official" data. It also asks people to fill out free-form narratives and apply short tags that endeavor to give additional color and flavor to descriptions of what people know. Finally, it asks colleagues to endorse their peers and bosses and adopts recommender and badging techniques common to such platforms in the private sector. These third-party endorsements, à la LinkedIn, corroborate self-assessments.
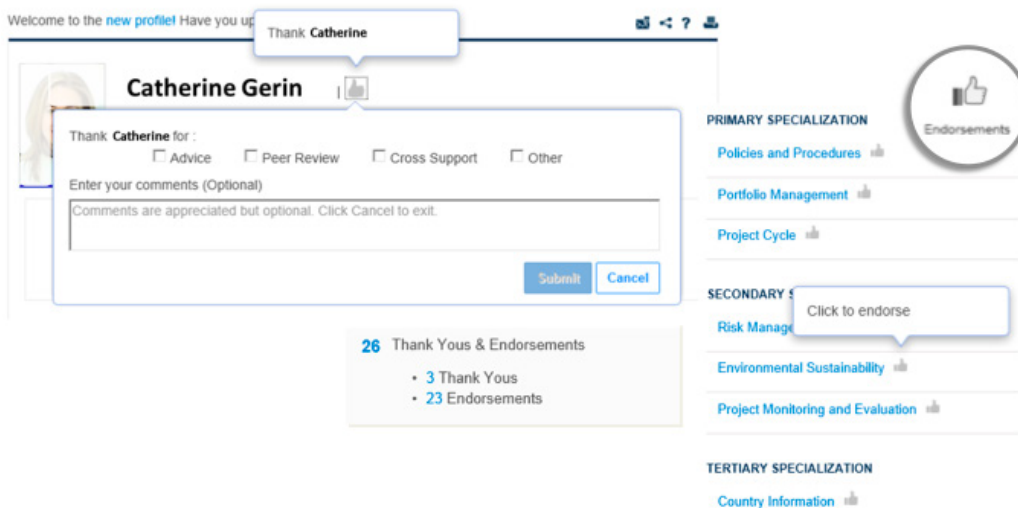
The platform improves the quality of self reported data by allowing endorsements between colleagues.

One of the challenges of building such an expert network is knowing how to organize information using a vernacular familiar to the institutional culture. The World Bank already possessed a shared vocabulary [4] comprised of a taxonomy of development topics at the core of the Bank's mission on one hand, and a taxonomy of business functions common throughout most organizations on the other. It was able to build on these dictionaries to ensure that expertise would be more searchable using terms common within the Bank.

USING SKILLFINDER TO ACCELERATE THE SEARCH FOR KNOWLEDGE

Now that SkillFinder has been deployed, the Water Practice is testing its ability to target and pinpoint expertise since November 2015 by launching a help desk called "Askwater" to help people formulate questions, find experts and get answers. Saura explains that the goal of the helpdesk is to "enable a dialogue between knowledge and implementation by connecting operational teams to what the organization knows." It makes it easier to access a "complex system of distributed experts, databases, search and analytical tools," including SkillFinder.

Staff can email the helpdesk with a specific question, such as "What is our approach to tackling urban groundwater challenges in megacities?" One of the 6 helpdesk personnel use SkillFinder to reach out to internal and external experts, search databases and reply within a few days to a week. Interesting answers are also shared with the group on their internal platform. So far, the help desk has received around 30 requests in three months, with good feedback.

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4   http://vocabulary.worldbank.org/

Beyond well-organized repositories and clear organizational structures, a task team can use a mediator (an intermediary between the practitioner and a complex network of tools and resources) who will hand them a concrete, quick and targeted answer to their technical question. This activates networks, promotes experts, build a more cohesive practice while testing the extent–and the limits, of our current knowledge.

Pascal Saura
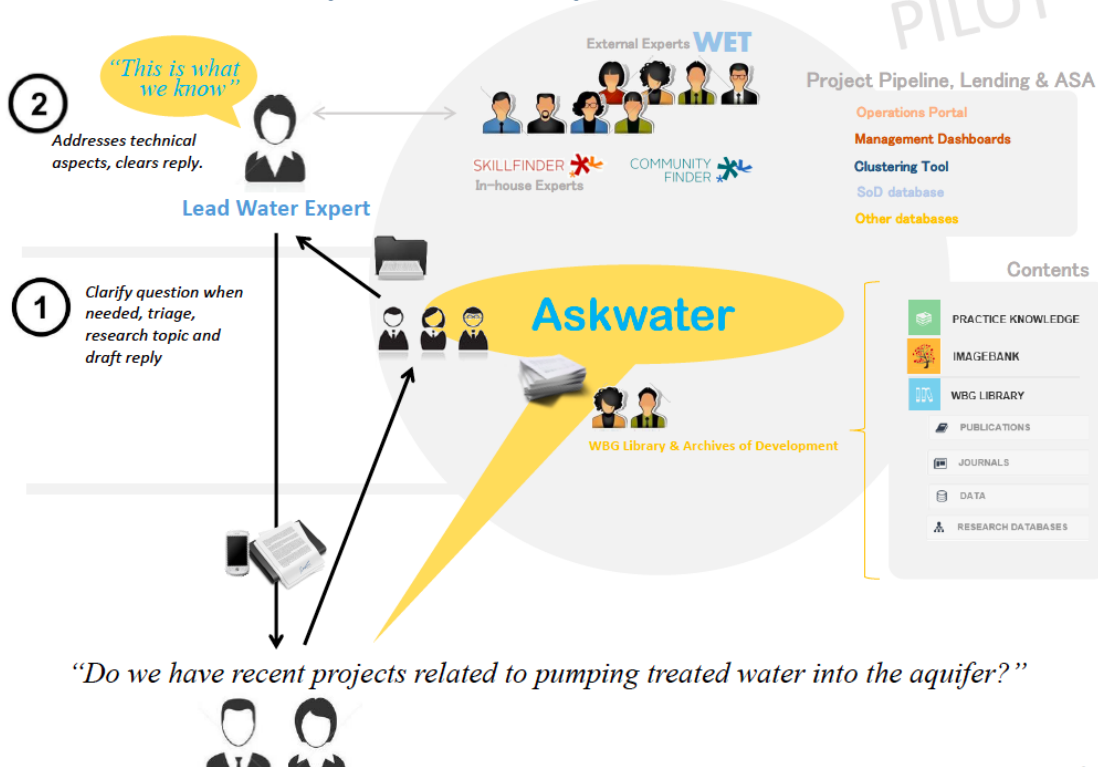
Employees reaching out to the Help Desk get an answer based on a network of knowledge sources such as databases, experts, and the talent network SkillFinder.

Through this pilot, the World Bank is testing if the ability to target and pinpoint expertise and to match people to problems based on their skills makes a difference for projects such as a water quality study in Punjab, India, or an assessment of access to sanitation in low income communities in Tanzania.

ABOUT THE GOVLAB

The GovLab's mission is to improve people's lives by changing how we govern. Our goal is to strengthen the ability of institutions – including but not limited to governments – and people to work more openly, collaboratively, effectively and legitimately to make better decisions and solve public problems. For more information, please visit: *www.thegovlab.org*.

ABOUT SMARTER STATE

New tools—what GovLab calls technologies of expertise— are making it possible to match the supply of citizen expertise to the demand for it in government. Smarter State is a GovLab initiative to design and test how public decision-making could improve if institutions knew how to use the technologies of expertise to tap the wisdom of citizens' and civil servants.

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