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# PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK REPORT

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This publication was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development. It was prepared by Mr. Marwan Ata – Database Management Specialist – USAID Jordan Economic Development Program (SABEQ)

# **PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES FOCUS GROUP FEEDBACK REPORT**

USAID JORDAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (SABEQ)

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AUTHOR: MR. MARWAN ATA,

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## **Professional Communities Focus Group Feedback Report**

### **Introduction**

*“Professional communities: the process of social learning that occurs when people who have a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate over an extended period to share ideas, find solutions, and build innovations”. Wikipedia*

Professional Communities is an InsTran initiative that will serve as means through which SABEQ’s technical experts will better and more directly connect with, support, and make value-added resources available to a greater number of Jordanian client-beneficiaries. It will also create a space among Jordanian professional that will encourage cooperation and competition in related activities. Furthermore, it will empower professionals with the understanding, the motivation and the means to improve their individual skills and to drive the inside out transformation of their respective organizations.

Three pilot communities were identified: Human Resources Management, Strategic Management and Trade. Each professional community will be led by a SABEQ technical specialist who will maintain a close relationship with the professional community members.

### **Objective of the focus groups**

Before the planned launch of each community, it is important to validate the concept, get feedback from potential beneficiaries, and determine whether the pilot communities will add-value to its members. It is also important to know whether prospective members would be willing to participate actively in community activities and if so gain feedback from what they would value.

The focus groups that were held May 26 – 29 gave InsTran an idea of the level of commitment from the potential members and whether the initiative will be sustainable in the long term. The focus groups were made up of potential beneficiaries from the public and private sector. The professional community concept was discussed and feedback was received from those who participated. The following report outlines the approach used, the results, and final recommendations.

## **Approach**

Four focus groups were held over three days. A Human Resources Management focus group was held on 27<sup>th</sup> of May, two Strategic Management focus groups were held on 28<sup>th</sup> of May, and one focus group on the Trade was held on 29<sup>th</sup> of May.

The focus groups were lead by Sahar Al-Yousef and the questions were designed to encourage open discussion and interactive dialogue among the participants. A flip chart and tape recorder were used in order to summarize the ideas and suggestions provided by the participants, as well as to record the conversations that took place.

The lists of potential participants were provided by the Professional Community Leaders, and potential participants were invited via phone calls. Out of the 85 potential participants that were invited, 42 confirmed (i.e. 49%). The following table breaks down the number and type of participant per community.

| <b>Focus Group</b>                | <b>No. of participants</b> | <b>No. of expected participants</b> | <b>% of participants</b> | <b>No. &amp; % of female participants</b> | <b>No. of active members</b> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| <b>Human Resources Management</b> | 9                          | 14                                  | 64%                      | 7 (77%)                                   | 5                            |
| <b>Strategic Management</b>       | 15                         | 15                                  | 100%                     | 5 (33.3%)                                 | 8                            |
| <b>Trade</b>                      | 11                         | 17                                  | 64%                      | 3 (27%)                                   | 5                            |
| <b>Total</b>                      | <b>35</b>                  | <b>46</b>                           | <b>76%</b>               | <b>15 (42%)</b>                           | <b>18 (51%)</b>              |

## **Focus Group Questions and Results**

**Q1:** Is it useful to share your personal work experience with your peers? What are the advantages and disadvantages of sharing your work experience among your colleagues?

**R1:** All the participants agreed that it is useful to share experiences among each other

| Advantages   | Disadvantages  |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) One learns from others and their company's challenges.</li> <li>2) Everyone has an experience to share</li> <li>3) Getting feedback on a new initiative that a member may want to launch.</li> <li>4) Companies look for opportunities to share their work experience; i.e. exporting to the US</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Encounter copy right or intellectual property right issues within the Jordanian community (agreed by the majority)</li> <li>2) High competitive market may hinder sharing experiences and ideas.</li> <li>3) A member of a professional community may have a conflict of interest with their employer in sharing or publishing company information.</li> </ol> |

**Q2:** Do you think that reading books, articles, and case studies; and applying templates and tools to your daily work is useful to your business? Do you think it helps to improve your company or the company you work for?

**R2:** The majority of the participants agreed that this is very useful and they do practice it in their daily work.

- Using existing tools & templates allows effective use of their time & effort.
- Using existing databases gives members easy access to tools, templates and articles. It also facilitates the time it takes to search for these items.

**Q3:** What sources do you use to find tools, articles and templates? What are the advantages/disadvantages of each source?

**R3:** The majority agreed that the internet is the most useful source and books as the second most useful source to find information.

### Internet

| Advantages:   | Disadvantages:  |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Quick to use</li> <li>2) Available at different places; internet is easily accessible at various locations.</li> <li>3) There are many tools, articles and templates available on the internet</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Too many resources available which make the search and vetting process difficult and time consuming.</li> <li>2) Not familiar with searching techniques.</li> <li>3) Too many unrelated articles and tools to search through.</li> <li>4) There are not a lot of region-specific resources available.</li> <li>5) There are a limited amount of resources in Arabic.</li> </ol> |

## Books

| Advantages:   | Disadvantages:  |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) There are a lot of books available in Arabic</li><li>2) Easy to access</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) A lot of time is spent searching for information</li><li>2) There are not a lot of region-specific resources available</li><li>3) Information protected by complicated usage rights.</li></ol> |

**Q4:** When you are faced with a new problem, or a new task that requires further research and knowledge, where do you find this information?

**R4:**

- Search on the internet.
- Ask the experts / consultants.
- Read books.
- Take a look at the similar experiences of others.

**Q5:** If there is a source that gives you the opportunity to meet with peers, share knowledge, ask experts, and have access to a variety of resources, such as tools, templates, case studies, articles, best practices, etc., would you be interested in joining and/or using it?

**R5:**

- Yes, if the source was really useful and continuously updated then there will be commitment (agreed by the majority).
- An interest in the community will increase the members' commitment.
- The source must provide services beyond what is already available on internet websites

**Q6:** How would a Professional Community succeed and what are the factors that would make it attractive to individuals?

**R6:**

- If it provides local or region specific resources (agreed by the majority).
- If the available resources are easy to find and use (agreed by the majority).
- The most important issue is to have a managing body that is responsible for coordinating the meetings and forums, as well as managing the database, choosing topics, setting the action plan, manage membership and motivate the participation and sharing among members. (agreed by the majority)

- If the members of the community are categorized according to their interests (agreed by the majority).
- A code of ethics is required (agreed by the majority).
- If the Professional Community is sustainable.
- If there are clear objectives, a mission and a vision for the idea.
- If there are regular meetings and events which keep the participants updated and active.
- If there is a diverse array of members.

**Q7:** What are the reasons for the idea of professional communities to fail?

**R7:**

- If there is no management of the Professional Community, and full responsibility falls on the members (agreed by the majority).
- If there is no continuity of the idea (PC) (agreed by the majority).
- If the tools, resources and other members' experiences do not add value or if the information is not practical, useful, or hard to find (agreed by the majority).
- If activities become routine without adding value (agreed by the majority).
- If members take on too much responsibility within their community and it consumes a lot of their time (agreed by the majority).
- If members' employers are not involved or do not approve Professional Community activities (agreed by 50% of the participants).
- Members may be reluctant to share among other members in the same sector they compete in (suggested by many participants but it wasn't agreed upon by the majority).
- If inactive members do not share tools and experiences, and only if a few active members do (suggested by many participants but it wasn't agreed by the majority).
- Copy right can affect the level of sharing among the Professional Community members, since the information belongs to the company that employs them.

**Q8:** If you were a member of a professional community, what is the level of commitment you would be willing to give (time & effort)?

**R8:** The majority of the participants agreed that they will be committed to the PC either by the internet or personally, as long as there are:

- Resources and benefits that add value (agreed by the majority)
- Resource that are relevant to Jordan and that are in Arabic.
- Approval from member company's top management and aware of the benefits that professional communities offers (50% of the participants agreed with).



**Q9:** Do you have any suggestions, comments or ideas?

**R9:** Suggestions & new ideas:

- Divide the Professional Community into sub communities based on the level of the participants (i.e. managers, employees or business owners) (suggested by many participants and agreed by some participants)
- Offer incentives in order to motivate the members (i.e. training courses, free consultation, etc)
- Post job offers on the professional community website.
- Invite international experts and consultants to participate in the professional community so that members benefit from international expertise.
- Coordinate with non-Jordanian associations and foreign professional communities to share ideas and experiences.
- Applying the principle of chair person rotation in the Managing of the PC among the members.
- Involve local university professors in writing the Professional Community's vision, mission, and objectives.
- Involve retired local experts in the planning phase of the Professional Community.
- Link the Jordanian Professional Community with similar Professional Communities in the Arab region or worldwide.
- Have companies participate in the Professional Community instead of individuals.
- SABEQ should arrange a study tour or set up a meeting with international professional communities in order to learn from their mistakes or to apply some successful methods that will win commitment of members and to start the Professional Community effectively (suggested by the majority and agreed by all the participants)
- Involving academic staff in the planning stage of the Professional Community may not be practical.
- Members will be more effective and participatory if the name of the company they work for is kept anonymous.
- The non-active individuals can participate and share their ideas as a group instead of as individuals.
- The topics should be suggested by the members through the internet and the manager of the Professional Community should prioritize the topic based on surveys, polls, etc.
- In the first stage, a list of potential members must be prepared by SABEQ (members should be chosen based on academic qualifications, job positions, or experience) and in the second stage membership should be open to the public.

## Analysis/Recommendations

The focus group results clearly confirm that Professional Communities have strong potential to benefit Jordanian private sector individuals and companies. The operation of Professional Communities, as currently planned, should provide much of this anticipated value while allaying many of the concerns expressed by focus group participants. That said, focus group responses provided many additional lessons and ideas that will be incorporated into the operation of the focus groups. The following are most relevant:

- 1) Individual v. company membership: the InsTran team will need to determine the best method in regards to types of membership. Individuals will likely only be willing to participate actively and share information if they have the approval and support from their employers. Conflict of interest, copyright and insider information are just a few of the issues that may affect an individual member's level of participation and commitment. InsTran management and PC leaders will need to work closely with members, and their companies, to assure that these concerns are being addressed, and that individuals and companies alike are comfortable with the levels of information disclosure. SABEQ must also demonstrate to corporate leaders the benefits of allowing their employees to participate actively in Professional Communities
- 2) Competition: The individual members may be reluctant to share information with companies that they compete with in the same sector. SABEQ will need to work actively with initial community members to find the right mix of incentives, permissions, and securities that encourage community members, and the companies they represent, to share beneficial information in a manner that does not in any way harm their respective businesses. This will require an understanding of 'cooptition' as well as formal and informal rules for interaction, confidentiality, and disclosure within each community.
- 3) International v. regional/local resources and expertise: Although there are many tools and resources available on the internet there are not many region-specific resources or many that are available in Arabic. Professional Communities must make sure there are sufficient resources available to members, and that these are easy to find. There also needs to be the right mix of local, regional, and international resources. Arabic language resources will be particularly valued.
- 4) Beyond resources: The PC Leaders and the InsTran PC Manager should continuously invite both international and regional expertise and take advantage of the local and international pool of consultants that regularly work on the SABEQ project. Communities should offer more than simply access to best practice resources. They should truly extend SABEQ's assistance to a broader demographic.

- 5) Professional community management v. individual member responsibilities: Initially, SABEQ will need to be fully engaged in managing the community so that members do not feel as if being a member will consume too much of their time. The benefits of community membership simply must outweigh the costs. SABEQ management of communities must be professional and consistent. SABEQ will need to actively gauge the benefits and costs of community participation, and ensure that the former outweigh the latter. SABEQ will also want create and maintain both a clear vision and a community code of ethics.
- 6) Local Copy right concerns: SABEQ will need to take extra precaution to ensure that no copyright infringements occur (particularly for local resources). SABEQ Professional Communities will consider allowing anonymous submissions or submissions where the names of local companies are not included.
- 7) Similar regional or international community of practice: InsTran will need to search for similar regional and/or international communities of practice and coordinate with them to capture the benefits of their experiences and learn from their pitfalls. Expanding the professional communities in the future to reach the regional or international professional communities is one of the important members' concerns.

**Sustainable Achievement of Business Expansion and Quality (SABEQ)**

**BearingPoint, Inc.**

**Salem Center, Sequleyah Street, Al-Rabiyeh**

**Amman, 11194 Jordan**

**Phone: + 962-6 550-3050**

**Web address: <http://www.SABEQ-Jordan.org>**