

Learning About Learning: Lessons on Implementing a KM and Learning Project from the USAID KDMD Project

Adaptive Management: Staffing

What we mean by Staffing:

Under many circumstances, appropriate staffing can be a management challenge, but for adaptive, learning-based projects, it's imperative to recruit, attract, hire, onboard, grow, and retain highly qualified staff with a keen, critical eye and flexible nature.

How it works:

Staff are at the heart of all projects, whether full-time, part-time, or consulting, and building a strong team is one of the key factors of project success. For adaptive, learning-focused projects in particular, it's important to find the right kind of people and then foster an environment where they can thrive. Team members with strong adaptive management skills tend to be big picture thinkers and problem solvers with the ability to work collaboratively to share ideas and independently to get things done. They should demonstrate curiosity and creativity with a hint of perfectionism that always keeps them aiming for improvement. They're the kind of people who can jump right in and learn as they go. They don't need templates and standardized processes – they appreciate building on the lessons of “what works” and then blazing a new trail. They know how to fail fast and just as quickly bounce back to find solutions. By building teams with these characteristics, staff are not only well-positioned to adapt to changing the requirements and circumstances common to adaptive management and learning, they help define solutions that move the entire industry forward.

Learn More:

Once these values are set, it's important to understand the nuances and incentives involved in optimizing a staffing process. These include:

Recruiting

- Good human resources and recruiting capabilities housed within the organization

Why it matters:

Knowledge-driven projects require a creative, collaborative, and energetic workforce with a passion for bringing innovation and learning to international development. Staffing is the process a project uses to match the right professionals to the right positions to optimize performance.

What it looks like:

The KDMD Project was fortunate to have a highly skilled, exceptional team that often received praise and kudos from across the industry. This was not by chance. KDMD's hiring managers looked just as much to attitude and enthusiasm as to skill and talent. Beyond that, there were no prescriptive trainings or “ways of doing” many things. Instead, new members were given free reign of tools like the wiki, mentored by a variety of team members, and encouraged to bring their unique spin to the work.

- A good informal network of knowledge practitioners within the project team
- An integrated, seamless hiring process between the prime contractor and any subcontractors

Attracting

- The hiring firm has a great reputation for providing knowledge services
- The project has positive name recognition among international development practitioners

Hiring

- Well-written position descriptions outline jobs, responsibilities, and requirements clearly. Depending on the type of hire, position descriptions could be very broad or very specific.
- Before asking candidates about their background, give them an overview of the project so they can tailor their answers and make them relevant
- Hiring managers understand that knowledge practitioners need to have the right "intangibles" in addition to minimal requirements
- Soft skills are key: flexibility, confidence without arrogance, creative problem solving, political savvy, and having the right mindset; people who don't get upset with pushback (unflappable; can accept constructive criticism and find solutions)
- Recognize that candidates who self-actualize through field work and working directly with beneficiaries may not be satisfied working on knowledge and learning projects; address this head-on to help candidates make the right decision about their interest in the project
- For consultants, this requires a well-written, well-scoped statement of work with clear deliverables, a schedule, and a payment system

On-boarding

- Project-specific training that helps the new employees or consultants through the learning curve
- Peer assists, shadowing, or other techniques to ease the candidates entry

Growing

- Ability for professional growth, self-learning, and promotion within the project
- Periodic skill and career advice from project management in addition to formal performance reviews

Retaining

- Ability to be involved with interesting, engaging work
- Ability to understand how a knowledge and learning project improves practice in the field
- Ability to see how a knowledge-driven project ties to progress at USAID and enhances development partnerships

Additional Resource:

[“How I Hire: 5 Tips for Landing a Job at IDEO”](#) by Tim Brown