

Evaluation of Heads Together Pilot Project : Summary

Sue Granville, George Street Research Limited

Heads Together is an online community offering headteachers opportunities to support and learn from each other and to engage in dialogue with policy advisers and decision-makers. In 2002, George Street Research was commissioned to conduct an evaluation of the Heads Together Pilot Project in order to assess the use of Heads Together, to identify criteria for effective use and barriers to use and to identify the impact on users. This report presents a summary of the key findings of the evaluation.

Main Findings

- A broad range of different channels of communication is utilised by headteachers and there is little antipathy to the use of ICT as one channel of communication. However, channels of communication are selected on the basis of specific requirements and headteachers cite instances where there are preferences for using other channels of communication.
- One barrier to the effective introduction of Heads Together is inconsistency in hardware and software packages provided, and ICT training across local authorities.
- Access and usage of Heads Together is relatively limited and only a minority of respondents is accessing the website on a daily basis or as regularly as a few times a week.
- There is an assumption from some headteachers that Heads Together duplicates other information sources rather than being unique as a source of advice, help and support.
- Facilitators need to adopt a very pro-active role in communicating the benefits of Heads Together to headteachers. A range of different channels of communication should be utilised.
- A number of key messages are identified for dissemination to headteachers
 - ✓ Offering access to the views of headteachers across Scotland, not just restricted to a local authority
 - ✓ A platform for sharing and exchanging information / ideas / problems / issues
 - ✓ Keeping headteachers up to date on topical issues and providing information in relation to legislative and educational changes
 - ✓ A unique offering, not available elsewhere
 - ✓ Improving access to other headteachers across the whole of Scotland
 - ✓ Preventing feelings of isolation
 - ✓ Offering a strategic viewpoint
 - ✓ Providing information (that is not covered elsewhere) on topical issues impacting on headteachers
 - ✓ Offering speedy and immediate answers to questions
 - ✓ Providing support and advice not offered elsewhere
 - ✓ Offering opportunities to clarify issues of importance with other headteachers
 - ✓ Capacity to download school policies and help to reduce workloads

- Third party endorsement of Heads Together is seen to be independent, objective and credible. Heads Together should utilise third parties wherever possible to help encourage use of Heads Together. These include local authorities, local “champions” and recommendations from existing users of the website.
- There are long term opportunities to open up Heads Together to other types of teacher and extending the number of closed communities.

Introduction

Heads Together is an online community offering headteachers opportunities to support and learn from each other, and engage in dialogue with policy advisers and decision-makers. The pilot project was introduced in Scotland in 2002 and is supported by facilitators, an administrator and a development officer. The pilot has the aims of :

- Supporting the development of management skills of existing headteachers
- Supporting headteachers in their day to day role by providing them with a mechanism for mutual support, the potential solution of problems and the sharing and creation of new ideas
- Reducing the isolation of headteachers in small or remote schools
- Raising the ICT skills of participating headteachers
- Making participating headteachers aware of the potential role for ICT in administration, management, teaching and learning.

Aims and Objectives

The Heads Together project is geared towards providing support for the managerial responsibilities of headteachers, developing leadership characteristics, enhancing ICT skills and increasing awareness of the important role of ICT within schools. Before rolling out Heads Together on a Scotland-wide basis, the Scottish Executive wished to evaluate the pilot phase of the Heads Together project in order to :

- Explore how ICT might be used to support the existing community of Scottish headteachers
- Examine how ICT can enhance the professionalism of headteachers by providing them with opportunities to network with other headteachers sharing the same interests and concerns.

The precise objectives of the evaluation were defined as

- To assess the use of the Heads Together pilot project in Scotland
- To identify criteria for effective use and barriers to use
- To identify the impact on users.

Methodology

The **research methodology** comprised a number of key elements :

1. Qualitative research among facilitators, administrator and development officer. A total of 4 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted.

2. Qualitative research among headteachers. A total of 16 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted among headteachers across a range of different types of school and geographical locations.
3. Quantitative research among headteachers. A total of 200 semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2003 and 308 in May 2003.
4. Ongoing contact with facilitators throughout the duration of the pilot.

MAIN FINDINGS

Current Channels of Communication

Headteachers use a broad range of different channels of communication and there appears to be little antipathy to the use of ICT as a channel of communication.

However, depending on the advice or information being sought, there are some preferences for use of non-ICT channels of communication. Where interactive discussion is needed, there is a preference for personal contact, either on a face-to-face or telephone basis. Thus, even in the longer term, it is likely that ICT will be one of a number of different channels of communication, selected on the basis of application and functionality.

One important factor that has a capacity to impact upon the use of ICT as a channel of communication is a lack of consistency in hardware and software provision across different local authorities. Across Scotland as a whole, there is a need to ensure consistency and compatibility of ICT facilities available to schools and to provide training to headteachers and other educational practitioners. The Spark initiative¹ currently underway should go a long way to removing some of the barriers to ICT use that have been identified in this programme of research.

Attitudes Towards, and Usage of, ICT

The data suggest that there is no deep-rooted antipathy to using ICT and a majority of headteachers are using ICT on a regular basis. However, there are signs that further training at a more sophisticated level would be appreciated.

Inconsistency in hardware and software packages provided and a lack of quick and efficient internet access (broadband would be preferable) serve to make internet access difficult for some respondents and can reduce propensity to use ICT as a means of communication and support.

Access and Usage Of Heads Together Pilot Project

Usage of the Heads Together website is relatively limited both in terms of the parts of the sites which are accessed and the frequency with which they are accessed. Greatest proportions of respondents log onto Heads Together in their own time outwith the traditional school day. Similarly, participation in activities is relatively low, with greater proportions of headteachers using the website to look or browse or to obtain information than pro-actively participate in activities. Those using Heads Together more frequently are most positive about the website.

¹ This is currently being introduced by the Scottish Executive and aims to provide Scottish schools and education authorities with a shared set of secure web-based services and applications.

Ease of access to the website does not appear to be an issue for most respondents, although a minority has experienced problems. There does not appear to be one overriding access issue, rather a range of different problems, albeit that many of these are related in some way to internet access.

The key barrier preventing use of the Heads Together site is lack of time. However, there are a number of other barriers identified by respondents and these include

- Problems with internet access (lack of broadband, lack of speed of access, limited / no internet access and so on)
- Lack of ICT skills (most respondents have a basic understanding of ICT but not all are confident users of ICT)
- Preferences to use a wide range of channels of communication
- Priority (or lack of) accorded to Heads Together as a means of offering support, advice and help
- Access / navigational issues in relation to Heads Together website
- Low awareness of what is available from the Heads Together website

The Impact of Heads Together Pilot Project

Despite relatively low levels of access and usage, headteachers are broadly positive about Heads Together and supportive of the concept of an online community. However, there tends to be an assumption from individual headteachers that others are using the website more frequently than they are. In practice, the findings of this survey show this is not the case and that low usage levels are fairly consistent.

A number of potential benefits are acknowledged by headteachers and it will be important to communicate these positively and pro-actively to others to optimise usage. These benefits include :

- Support / advice not offered by other sources
- One stop shop offering advice, help and support and which can save time
- Contact with headteachers throughout Scotland (most contact at present is limited to local authorities)
- Provision of information on topical issues (many of which might not have been previously considered)
- Contact with other headteachers on a confidential basis
- Opportunities to exchange information / ideas
- Prevents feelings of isolation

Overall, the data from this programme of research shows that there is a need for Heads Together to be pro-actively and positively “sold” to its target audience and to emphasise how this differs from other sources of information and help.

Future Usage of Heads Together

Most respondents are positive about future usage of Heads Together, with over six in ten who are currently using the website claiming their usage will increase in the future. However, limited time was again identified as a potential barrier to increased usage.

The research has identified a number of factors that will help to increase usage of the Heads Together website and it will be important that these suggestions are taken on board. These include communication and pro-activity on the part of local authorities, facilitators and “champion” headteachers. This is particularly important given that the qualitative research shows that there is an assumption on the part of some headteachers that the Heads Together site remains static rather than continually evolving and growing.

There is also a need to continue to enhance and build the website, ensuring inclusion of topical issues. In some instances issues may be raised by headteachers themselves but in others it will be necessary for facilitators to anticipate and pre-empt new issues that are likely to be important to headteachers.

Adoption of these measures will help to increase awareness and thereby usage of the website in the longer term.

Training, Support and Communication

Headteachers are largely positive about the training received to date, although some would like more follow up training and ongoing support. Data relating to access and usage of Heads Together suggest that pro-activity on the part of facilitators may serve to prompt increased usage of the website.

There is a need for the benefits of Heads Together to be clearly communicated to headteachers in order to reiterate the usefulness of the online community and encourage greater use.

In terms of future usage of the website, we believe that communication is an important issue that needs to be addressed.