Return on investment for an information business

Developing staff skills to prepare for the Department's transformation to a services organisation.

Land and Property Information (LPI) is a division of the Department of Finance, Service and Innovation. They are the key provider of land information services in New South Wales, Australia, which includes spatial information, titling information and valuations.

Steven Woodhouse, the Chief Information Officer of the NSW Department of Land Property and Information (LPI) had created a strategy to turn the ICT department from a traditional environment into a services organisation.

"I wanted us to work as a service organisation within LPI"; commented Steven. To do this, he had to set up a vision of what the organisation would look like. In order to see this 'future state', they needed to understand their current situation. LPI turned to SFIA to understand what skills they had currently, and to determine what skills they would need in the future.

In addition to the drive to achieve their strategy, at the same time, the Public Service Commission were introducing the new employment act and the Capability Framework. The PSC's plan was to change from individual position descriptions to role descriptions. It was considered that this change would enable people within the public sector to become more mobile, and move within and across public sector organisations.

The Capability Framework contained 5 soft skills that were required to be part of each role, and for IT, SFIA was included as the framework to determine what ICT skills were required for the role.

> I wanted all my staff to understand what their skills were and how we could help them to develop those skills to meet our future needs".
> - Steven Woodhouse, CIO

A three-phased approach

BSMimpact were engaged as a partner to help LPI implement SFIA using a three phased approach. "The most important part was educating our staff as to why they were doing this. Staff had no idea what SFIA was and the rumour and innuendo was rife. The initial response from staff was that I was using this as a way to get rid of staff... in fact it was the exact opposite!" commented Steven. "I wanted all my staff to understand what their skills were and how we could help them to develop those skills to meet our future needs".

BSMimpact helped LPI to conduct risk and benefits workshops, which were relatively quick and simple, but they served to provide an understanding of the risks involved, the individual benefits staff could expect, and the organisational benefits expected from the SFIA implementation.

> "I can not highlight enough that communications are the critical component of making all this come together", states Steven.

Communications were considered for each audience; from the executive overviews through to the awareness training.

To ensure all targets were covered, the team built a communication strategy and plan, and built a "message house" that helped consider the best messages for the team. All staff, from the executive team down needed to understand what SFIA was, what it was for, and why the organisation would benefit from it.

The communications piece was developed in association with sister department NSW Office of State Revenue. Part of the communications involved SFIA animations and movies, which were placed on the internal website. There were also a number of staff meetings, where staff were encouraged to ask questions.

Formal training was also undertaken for different members of staff. Senior IT and Senior HR all did both the "Understanding SFIA" and "Advanced SFIA" Courses together. There was also a "Training for Team Leaders and People Managers" course to provide additional details on why SFIA was important for their people and give them the knowledge to be able to field questions from their team.

By this stage a number of resources had been developed and were placed on the internal website. There were frequently asked questions, videos, plus a generic email address which was monitored by Steven and his immediate team. Whist these communications helped alleviate some fear and doubt, there were still people that were fearful of the exercise and what it meant for them.

Steven Woodhouse speaks at the SFIA6 launch in Australia, August 2015

After the training had taken place, all staff were asked to complete an online self-assessment. Staff were able to go online and complete an assessment which was based on the whole SFIA framework. After the self assessments were completed, every staff member that participated had a one on one validation session with a SFIA Accredited Consultant to understand and validate their skills. This process was completed for both ICT staff and Project Managers from the business.

The end result was that the organisation had a baseline of what the skills currently held. Each person received a validated certificate which confirmed the skills they held at that point in time.

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Return on investment for an information business (continued...)

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"We knew we were weak in a number of places, but after doing the baseline assessment, we realised we were weak in a couple more areas than originally thought. The exercise served to identify that we didn't have some of the skills we knew we would need to achieve our vision", said Steven.

The gap between what they had, and what they believed they needed for their future state was extremely important.

Assessment Findings

129 people out of 131 went through the self-assessment and validation process. Staff had an average of 30.2 skills after self-assessment, which reduced to 8.2 skills post-validation.

Staff influence levels were lower than average when looking at the levels of responsibility (autonomy, influence, business change and influence). Steve believes that this is tied to perceptions of hierarchy and the bringing together of a number of different organisations to make LPI what it is today which has led to today's organisational culture.

There appeared to be a lack of skills at level 6 – which relates to "setting standards". Whilst those skills are present at some level, the issue is more that staff have not been given the opportunity to build skills to that level.

There was a lack of ownership of organisational wide processes. In order to achieve their vision, there is a requirement to influence the whole organisational culture, therefore ownership of organisational wide skills need development.

And finally, the review of the organisational assessment identified a need to create opportunities to develop skills. This was addressed in Phase 2.

At the end of Phase 1, the organisation had developed a number of artefacts; a database of skills, a variety of communications and a recognition that there was a need to fill the skills gap by further developing skills and restructuring the organisation.

> "We needed to get a flatter, more streamlined structure that allowed for the movement of skills from one place to another, plus we needed to enhance some skills and not worry about others. The performance management component was recognised as a logical next step, where our aim was to make people want to participate in performance management. That's why we tied our next phase of our SFIA journey in with performance management."

Phase 2 - performance management

This phase commenced with the recognition that there needed to be a place where individuals could work on practically using their knowledge. For example, an individual may have done a course, but have no practical application of that skill. They made the decision to develop Communities of Practice; a place where senior people can mentor and give junior people the opportunities to develop their skills.

An internal sharepoint site was created and split into 4 separate Communities which were aligned to 4 of the 6 categories in SFIA Version 5. For example, one Community of Practice is Strategy and Architecture. The lead mentor is the Enterprise Architect, who leads and mentors others in any area of architecture.

To ensure the right people were invited to the right Community and to ensure there were people internally that could assist staff in being re-assessed over time, some internal staff were trained to be assessors. A fairly stringent process was put into place to manage this task. Reassessment ties back to their performance contract, and a Manager has to support the reassessment.

The individual is required to create a short presentation that justifies their request for reassessment. This is presented to two assessors; one that assesses the activities completed, and the other assesses the process taken to ensure it is working properly.

Ensuring the task is completed successfully ensures that the organisation's overall database of skills continues to be as accurate as it can be, at any point in time, rather than just the initial assessment.

Steve commented "skills are all going to change as we move into the new structure we want to achieve. We need to be able to measure, monitor and understand how we are changing and what we need to do to manage that".

Participation in the Community of Practice involves participating in online questions and answers, attending conferences, or writing a white paper. Individuals get different points for different activities and each individual will need to achieve a certain number of points per year that contribute to their performance appraisal. Lower levels of staff can accrue points simply by asking questions. Higher points can be accrued by required to write white papers or mentor individuals, for example.

Phase 3: Next steps

LPI is not planning to stop now. The plan is to continue with their restructure, to start recruiting in areas where no skills are present, and further integrate with HR. All role descriptions will have SFIA components.

There are three main areas that will be a focus in the coming months.

Development and Career Planning

Using SFIA is not about getting rid of staff, but about helping individuals with personal development and their career plan. Steve acknowledges that their career may not be inside the organisation, but from a public sector perspective it should be transportable across the public sector.

Project Management

When Project Managers are building their work breakdown structures, they will be able to go to the skills database to find resources with the right skills. If those skills are not available internally, they can then recruit, or work out a time schedule to use the internal resources they have.

Work with other departments / the Business

Work with the Office of State Revenue (OSR) was hinged on the intent to share resources and share opportunities. There is a genuine want to expand the Communities of Practice with OSR and integrate more with the Business. Getting Project Manager involvement was the first step in this journey, as it is not just an ICT role.