

# USING A CONTENT STRATEGY TO COORDINATE AND COLLABORATE

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

A content strategy helps guide the creation, delivery, measurement, and governance of knowledge and learning content for USAID Missions and implementing partners.

Participation from staff supporting knowledge management, communication, and professional development functions enabled the creation of an editorial calendar and awareness of products being created across the Center for Education.

A content strategy helps build a system under which the professional development, knowledge management, and communications functions can work together to prioritize, develop, align, and disseminate products.

## BACKGROUND

The Center for Education (DDI/EDU) produces a range of knowledge products and trainings (both online and in-person) to help education practitioners to design and implement more effective education programming. In 2018, this content was primarily disseminated via newsletters and listservs, and historically there was not a great deal of collaboration or coordination across knowledge management (KM), communications, and professional development (PD) teams. In the run up to the launch of EducationLinks in August 2018, issues related to collaboration and strategic alignment of content across these different, but related, functions were brought to the forefront. EducationLinks would be a new space for education practitioners to find the latest USAID programming guidance and global evidence in the field of international education.

### WHAT IS A CONTENT STRATEGY?

The leading content strategy agency Brain Traffic [defines](#) content strategy as “guiding the creation, delivery, and governance of useful, usable content.” Brain Traffic’s dimensions of content strategy includes pillars of Systems Design and Content Design. **Systems Design** forms the base of the framework (Figure 1<sup>1</sup>) on which the other dimensions sit. **Structure** refers to the

FIGURE 1. CONTENT STRATEGY QUAD



<sup>1</sup> Graphic from: [Brain Traffic's Content Strategy Quad](#)

organization and classification of content (e.g. in a database and/or on a website). **Process** refers to the people, platforms, and processes involved in developing, disseminating, and managing content. **Content Design** is “the process of using data and evidence to give the audience the content they need, at the time they need it, and in a way they expect.” **Editorial** refers to the voice and tone of the content. **Experience** refers to how audiences discover, consume, and digest the content.

## CONTENT STRATEGY WITHIN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

DDI/EDU is not unlike many international development organizations in that the majority of its long-form content is delivered via PDF. The findings in the World Bank’s report [Which World Bank Reports Are Widely Read?](#), found that only a handful of reports from 2008-2012 were downloaded more than a few hundred times (let alone read and/or ideas applied in practice), and more than 500 reports were never downloaded at all. Some hypothetical (but likely real) issues that cut across the key components of a content strategy, particularly for organizations who primarily deliver content via PDF, are:

- Editorial: The content was not written in a way that resonated with audiences.
- Experience: The chosen format itself was not optimal for consuming content in the field.
- Structure: The content was not optimized for search engines and/or internal navigation.
- Process: The content either did not align with user needs topically or was not effectively disseminated.

The good practices, outcomes, and lessons learned below focus on the collaboration and coordination aspects of the content strategy implemented by EPIC from fall 2018 to spring 2021.

## GOOD PRACTICE

### CREATING PROCESSES

EPIC supported the creation and refinement of processes for knowledge products, newsletters, and professional development. These processes defined the standards, people, and tools to conceive, develop, disseminate, measure, and update content, and included:

- Definition of the content type;
- Detailed descriptions of each stage in the content development process;
- List of people involved during each stage (organized according to the RACI framework of being Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed);
- References and links (where applicable) to platforms and tools that support each process; and
- Proposed timing for each stage.

The *people engaged* and *consultation* parts of the process maps documented who should be considered as being part of a creation process. This helped create a more collaborative and consultative approach to content development.

### MAINTAINING A BLOG

To generate EducationLinks blog content, EPIC created and staffed a blog manager role. This person coordinated all the writing and clearance of blogs, and created a standardized blog process and style guide, ensuring a consistent consultation and coordination process. Having one point of contact for all EducationLinks blogs ensured processes and style guides were followed; helped move blogs from ideation, creation, and clearance to publication; and helped EPIC to cross-link existing related content. The process and style guide

enabled blogs to be written or co-written by USAID staff, partner organizations, or EPIC writers. The timeline outlined in the blog process was helpful to establish timelines and define roles during topic identification, drafting, clearance, and editing.

## CONTENT ALIGNMENT

The content strategy also created an avenue for relevant stakeholders to coordinate on product development, identify companion products, and help shape the overall direction of the content (and planned communications) through their respective lenses. A monthly content alignment meeting brought together staff (both USAID and EPIC) supporting communications, KM, and PD. Monthly agendas varied, but often included:

- Discussing active content development initiatives to ensure coordination and/or collaboration.
- Reviewing and updating strategies for companion products.
- Discussing the reach or use of recently published products.
- Reviewing upcoming editorial calendar themes and expected published products.

## OUTCOMES

### AWARENESS BUILDING

Monthly meetings with participation from staff supporting DDI/EDU KM, PD, and communications created an avenue to coordinate and collaborate around products being produced and communicated by various teams. These meetings reviewed metrics for communication channels (EducationLinks, internal and external newsletters, and social media), discussed updates and coordination around professional development activities, and coordinated prioritization and dissemination for knowledge products and communication campaigns. These meetings served as a valuable forum for staff to receive updates and coordinate on content that was being planned, created, or disseminated.

### PRODUCT COLLABORATION

The increased awareness of products being created across the EDU/DDI enabled content to be repurposed and adapted, ultimately increasing the channels and formats users could consume and engage with programmatic guidance and evidence. A few examples of this are:

- Use of key foundational knowledge products in the seven [online learning modules](#) created in 2020.
- Sharing of COVID-19-related resources throughout the [Global Education Learning Series](#), including the [Returning to Learning Toolkit](#) and [Education Resources in Response to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

## LESSONS LEARNED

### BE TRANSPARENT AND INCLUSIVE

The development of a clearly articulated, transparent, and well-socialized content strategy fosters uptake and buy-in with all stakeholders. Consider using a RACI chart or similar tool to define who is responsible, consulted, and informed for each point, since all decisions cannot be made by committee. If someone is not able to actively participate in a meeting or exchange, consider providing them an alternate way to contribute. Think about who will be affected by what is defined in a content strategy, and who will need to adopt or change their behavior.

Participation from staff supporting KM, PD, and communication functions was critical to discussions, enabling the creation of an EDU/DDI editorial calendar, and awareness of products being created across EDU/DDI. A content strategy helps build a system under which the PD, KM, and communications functions can work together to prioritize, develop, align, and disseminate products in the future.

### BE ITERATIVE AND INVEST THE TIME

When launching something new, like a content strategy, consider a pilot to test an approach or method on a small scale. Listen and make changes according to the feedback received and level of outcomes achieved. Taking the time to bring the right people to the table in order to create a content strategy or adapt an existing one not only builds trust in the process, it also creates efficiencies and fosters stakeholder engagement and support.

DDI/EDU now has a foundation to:

- Reinforce and measure the application and retention of knowledge from knowledge products and professional development opportunities;
- Discuss what is needed by education practitioners and what is being developed by USAID; and
- Increase support to USAID Missions and country programs to share their innovative approaches, good practices, and lessons learned.

*This brief was created by Education Performance Improvement, Communications, and Knowledge (EPIC), a five-year activity (2015-2021) of support services to the Center of Education (DDI/EDU). EPIC consisted of activities in four key areas that were implemented simultaneously: performance improvement through organizational effectiveness; professional development, training, and learning for all staff; knowledge management, generation, brokering, uptake, and use; and internal and external communications, engagement, and partnerships.*