

Building project-management capacity among researchers



The AgShare.Today team has built new project-management systems collaboratively so that they meet AgShare.Today's partner projects' needs

Overview

AgShare.Today is taking a range of approaches to improve the way that data is managed and results shared. One is to borrow high-performing project management tools and approaches from industry and provide them to research partners, along with training, to increase project efficiency.

Improving project management

Despite using cutting-edge laboratory techniques to generate data, research teams often attempt to implement projects using outdated approaches. Examples include managing teams via email and allowing individual researchers to curate their own data using tools such as Excel or Access. Such approaches regularly lead to repetition of effort and a range of frustrations and inefficiencies for teams focused on delivering research.

A key focus of AgShare.Today, therefore, is to provide centralized, modern project-management systems to our partner projects, along with the training that partners need to use those systems to efficiently deliver their scientific goals.

Project-tracking tools

The benefits of project-tracking software

An example of a simple but powerful tool that AgShare has introduced to improve project delivery is project-tracking software. This allows teams to track their progress against different deliverables and deadlines on one centralized dashboard – recording who is responsible for which activities, how close they are to delivering

them, and whether and why activities are likely to be delayed.

Used consistently, the system alerts a project's Team Leaders to potential delays early (before they become a problem). It also ensures that project achievements are properly captured (which provides a strong framework for annual-report writing and monitoring and learning).

Before AgShare introduced the system, Team Leaders from partner projects had to email or call team members to check whether work was on track. This made it difficult to get an accurate, rapid overview of progress and meant that senior team members spent valuable time going back and forth for updates.

How the use of the project tracking tool spread

Use of the tracking tool spread quickly through AgShare's projects, beginning with the African Cassava Whitefly Project in May 2016 (whose project manager said that it was "exactly what [the project] needs") and then spreading to the Cassava Diagnostics Project (CDP) team, for whom an intensive one-day session on the system was run at their 2016 annual meeting.

As teams like ACWP and CDP communicated with their colleagues about the usefulness of the system, the desire to use it spread among other project partners. This resulted in the tracker being requested by various smaller AgShare partner projects, for whom a training course on the system was run in late 2016.

In total, the AgShare.Today team has developed project trackers for seven of its partner projects, with excellent feedback from all. The team continues to provide *ad hoc* support to ensure that the trackers are kept up to date – as an important lesson was that the system requires a specific individual to be responsible for it if it is to be regularly updated.

Impact: project tracking

Partner projects have said that having up-to-date records of project progress has made it much easier to produce annual reports. And, on several projects, use of the tool has also identified areas where responsibilities for delivery were not clear, and thus where work was falling behind as no single individual felt responsible. Identifying this allowed managers to task team members specifically and get work back on track.

Building the capacity of staff in project management

Increased awareness of best practice

A key benefit of the work done to introduce project-tracking tools to our partners were the discussions that were triggered around how other aspects of project management can be streamlined.

CDP's leadership team, for example, engaged strongly with the concept of finding more efficient ways to manage different aspects of their programme. Eventually, this resulted in the agreement that AgShare would provide intensive project management training to two young female members of the CDP team.

The aim was to give these two trainees more responsibility for a variety of tasks (ranging from

managing project documentation online, to updating CDP's project tracker) and thus reduce the burden on CDP's senior management team.

Building project-management capacity in CDP

To meet CDP's needs, AgShare ran an intensive project-management workshop for the two CDP team members in August 2016 in the UK.

This 10-day workshop was designed to provide both women with skills that would mean that CDP's senior team could more confidently delegate various aspects of day-to-day management.

The sessions included intensive training in the use of tools like Outlook, SharePoint, and OneNote, along with training in project-management techniques for improved efficiency, project finance management, data validation, and online filing. Sessions were also run on the use of metadata, the use of calendars, and how to manage meetings online. Feedback forms were provided and both participants rated the workshop "Excellent".

Impact: project-management capacity building

The impacts of this work were felt most strongly as CDP drew to a close, because the two team members that AgShare trained helped to build a large online library of CDP materials that made a major contribution to project legacy – through an external resource centre that went live in late 2018, for example.

Lessons learned

- Many research project leaders would benefit from training in the day-to-day specifics of project management and managing teams.
- Tools like online (centralized) trackers that clarify who is responsible for the delivery of specific items have a huge impact on project delivery.
- Research teams often struggle to standardize approaches and methodologies across projects without strong project-management systems.

Find out more: Email.enquiries@agshare.today