

Same Difference?

Revolving Doors Agency's approach to replicating innovation

Summary

This paper is a case study of the key strategic decisions taken by Revolving Doors Agency in replicating its innovation. The learning gathered during this process reflects the challenges and choices faced by an organisation that is (i) attempting to replicate solutions to social problems that are entrenched, complex and systemic; and (ii) working at points in the system where there is little commissioning priority and where no single funder or Government body has responsibility.

Seven learning points come out of Revolving Doors Agency's experience:

1. Where unmet need results from gaps in commissioning, there has to be simultaneous focus on developing a model *and* shaping/informing the commissioning system.
2. Considerable investment is needed in 'filling the credibility gap' between innovative ideas and the external reality.
3. Clarity should be reached on whether new delivery expertise is needed by the system or whether existing expertise can be channelled.
4. A disciplined focus on 'good enough' outcomes is required so that the value of innovation gets replicated and preciousness is avoided.
5. Replication exists on at least two levels: replicating a delivery model and replicating the process of establishing and embedding that model locally.
6. A culture of constant enquiry is needed to avoid the illusion of a 'silver bullet'.
7. The journey towards replication is likely to require considerable willingness and capacity to change organisationally.

All of these learning points show the need for risk-related investment beyond the process of developing and running the initial innovation itself. Where complex social problems and environments exist, organisations are also likely to need longer term partnerships with funders in order to make an impact.

Background

Revolving Doors Agency was founded in 1993 to improve outcomes for people with mental health problems who move repeatedly between the criminal justice system and homelessness. It focuses in particular on a group of people who, for often complex reasons, fall between the services that might otherwise have supported them, including health, housing, drugs, benefits and adult social care.

The most significant early decision that Revolving Doors took was to develop and test a new model of support, called 'Link Working'. This model was designed to offer flexible outreach support to people who were repeatedly arrested and imprisoned but who were often disengaged from any other system. The Link Working model was run by Revolving Doors itself, and soon demonstrated that it could transform outcomes for highly excluded people: homelessness fell dramatically; use of primary and secondary health care significantly increased, while use of Accident and Emergency decreased; re-offending dropped substantially; and cost savings were observable across the system.

The remarkable success of Link Working bred expectations that the model would and could be replicated. Many involved in Revolving Doors thought that there should be a Link Worker Scheme in every local authority. This paper outlines some of the challenges and choices that faced Revolving Doors from this point and describes how the organisation responded.

1. Developing a model and changing the system

Projects that support people who fall through the gaps in services are themselves at risk of falling through the gaps in funding. Revolving Doors Agency was clear from the start that it needed to work simultaneously on developing an effective model of practice and on shaping and influencing the commissioning environment that might support and fund that practice.

The funding challenge was already clear in 1992 when the new way of working was first proposed:

“The fate of mentally vulnerable homeless people in the criminal justice system gets bogged down in fruitless debate about which Government department should take responsibility – i.e. who should pay?”

Revolving Doors dealt with this challenge in two ways. Locally, it took pains to calculate the cost benefits of the model accruing to a number of systems. As no single system could be expected to fund the scheme, several potential commissioners were drawn into a discussion about how the scheme could support their particular priorities and outcomes. This led quite quickly to a 'bundling' approach to local funding.

Secondly, as there was only limited room for manoeuvre in bending local resources, Revolving Doors also talked intensively to national Government about reforming wider policy and funding

frameworks. This proved a much longer term strategy but resulted in 2006 in the announcement by the Social Exclusion Task Force of a new focus on Adults facing Chronic Exclusion. Key to this breakthrough was the continuity of political administration that allowed organisations such as Revolving Doors to guide the Government gradually and persistently towards a new prioritisation of need.

It is unlikely, however, that the Government would have had the confidence to prioritise this new area of need if Revolving Doors had not be able to produce tangible evidence of effective practice. Hence, Revolving Doors had to sustain its innovation outside of existing policy and delivery priorities for **ten years** until the climate was right for change. The faith of charitable funders in supporting a long haul strategy was indispensable.

2. Filling the credibility gap

As a new organisation promoting ideas and practice that sat outside existing norms and cut across existing boundaries, Revolving Doors placed considerable emphasis on filling the credibility gap between itself and the environment within which it wanted to work. This took a number of forms:

- The Link Working approach was heavily researched and evidenced in order to demonstrate concrete outcomes, most ambitiously using a control group
- Service users were supported as early as possible to give personal testimony of the systemic difficulties that had faced them and the impact of the Link

Working approach. This evidence was vital in gainsaying suggestions that improvements in Government policy were mitigating the need for Link Working.

- The overall project was sponsored by a group of senior experts, several from partner organisations, who steered the direction of the work and publicly endorsed its value. This had the additional benefit of opening many doors locally.
- Revolving Doors' focus on talking to national Government enabled it, as much as possible, to align its thinking with wider policy intent, even while it did not match existing policy frameworks.

All these strategies required determined focus and financial support at times when their value was hard to justify amid competing organisational pressures.

3. Creating new delivery expertise or channelling existing expertise

Given the scale and complexity of the challenge, Revolving Doors was clear from the outset that it could not and should not attempt to do everything itself. However, it was not always clear where its role finished and that of other organisations began.

The need for Revolving Doors, as a new independent organisation, was originally seen to flow logically from the nature of the social problem being tackled:

“Given the history of ‘buck passing’ and inaction, an independent agency would be essential to act as a catalyst and to instigate discussions while avoiding the difficulties associated with vested interests”.

As already noted, the most significant early decision was for Revolving Doors to take on demonstration of the new model of working itself. This move to in-house delivery was felt to give Revolving Doors the credibility and prominence that it needed (i) to make a visible impact; (ii), to ‘know whereof it spoke’; and (iii) to show by doing. This decision carried considerable risks: most obviously whether, when and how to get the learning out of Revolving Doors and embedded into other delivery organisations; and what to do with the initial demonstration projects once they could be considered to have finished ‘demonstrating’.

Revolving Doors’ initial focus was on gaining full-cost recovery for its demonstration projects, in order to prove that the model could be mainstreamed. This objective took longer than expected, with the result that Revolving Doors held on to its initial projects for at least seven years. During that time, a strategy emerged of acting as an incubator for risky projects, until they were fully embedded/funded in a local area and could be transferred out. However, the first experience of transferring a project quickly exposed the extent to which this strategy could draw the organisation repeatedly away from developmental ideas and into bureaucratic and overly time-consuming processes.

The receding possibility that Revolving

Doors could transfer out fully-funded projects on a regular basis led it to consider becoming a thoroughgoing service delivery organisation. This idea was supported by the increasing pigeon-holing of Revolving Doors as ‘the organisation that runs Link Worker schemes’. However, this possibility was quickly checked by the realisation that other organisations were much better placed, through their economies of scale, their service infrastructure and the skills of their staff, to bear the financial and delivery risks of running such projects. The energy and resources required to become a large organisation could be invested instead in working with delivery partners, with much more rapid results.

Revolving Doors’ growing conviction in the value of partnership began in a small scale experiment to establish whether the Link Worker approach could be run by another organisation from the outset. Revolving Doors stepped back from holding all of the risk, and focused on the task of bringing the evidence, relationships, know-how and finances together to ensure that the new model of working could be embedded locally. This role was much more in line with the original notion of Revolving Doors as an independent catalyst and instigator, and was chosen as the most powerful means by which Revolving Doors could move beyond its initial demonstration phase.

Three strategic partnerships with major service delivery charities – P3, St Mungo’s and Richmond Fellowship – have already resulted. Revolving Doors’ role in these partnerships is to make the case locally for a new way of working,

establish the need, negotiate the multi-agency support and funding, and evaluate the outcome. Its vested interest is significantly reduced, allowing it to advise commissioners more transparently and effectively on how to invest in reaching the target client group.

4. *Preservation vs. Preciousness*

Working with delivery partners has inevitably challenged Revolving Doors to be clear about the elements of its innovation that are genuinely indispensable to the success of its model. There was a considerable temptation to believe that the success of Link Working resulted from a unique chemistry of insight, ability, knowledge and organisational culture that might not be transferable. This risked a level of insularity that was directly antipathetic to dissemination of learning. There was also a sustained attempt to capture the Link Working model in a 'how to' manual, which presented the equal risks of losing the lived reality of the work and teaching seasoned practitioners to suck eggs.

Early experience of partnership working led quickly to the realisation that the concept of a prescriptive formula was not only unhelpful but also illusory. It became clear that the insight, ability, knowledge and organisational culture of other organisations could add important new qualities and dimensions to the Link Working model. Rather than stamping a definitive model onto another organisation's culture, mutuality of learning be-

tween partners became a much more dynamic mode of thinking through the process by which Link Working could be replicated.

This experience brought clarity to the role of Revolving Doors: (i) to identify the broad principles of Link Working that could be applied and adapted in different organisations and different contexts; and (ii) to be clear what 'good enough' outcomes looked like. Revolving Doors realised that it was far more important to retain a keen focus on what outcomes needed to be improved, rather than insisting that they should only be improved 'the Revolving Doors way'.

5. *Replicating the journey*

As Revolving Doors has attempted to establish projects in new areas, it has come full circle organisationally, focusing its energies on the developmental process of engaging multiple systems in a dialogue about improving outcomes for excluded people. At the heart of this role remains the acknowledgement that there is no ready-made commissioner demand. In effect, the product Revolving Doors is now replicating is the 'journey' by which it established its Link Working model in the first place: generating and focusing multi-agency commissioner demand, and meeting that demand with a suitably imaginative and convincing model.

It is now clear that the success of the original Link Worker model was to a large degree attributable to local ownership and consensus; in other words, to the 'permission' given by several commis-

sioners and organisations to projects operating according to a more flexible and responsive set of rules. Having understood this, Revolving Doors now interprets its role as replicating the conditions of success and the quality of environment that allowed its original innovation to flourish.

The approach holds the considerable advantages of avoiding parachuting models into settings that may not accept them; of acknowledging and marshalling existing capacity and initiative in the local area; and of achieving a sense of ‘invented here’, which in the long run should support the embedding and sustainability of the projects.

Solutions to complex social problems emerge in the relationship between several factors:

- Interpretation of national policy intent
- Championing by regional and local commissioners
- Analysis of local need and demonstration of how this lines up with available investment
- Capacity and skills in available providers
- Multi-agency consensus across a broad set of local agencies.

This matrix of vertical and horizontal relationships is what Revolving Doors Agency is now focusing on through its National Development Programme. (see Annex)

6. *Silver bullets vs constant enquiry*

The territory that Revolving Doors occupies – between multiple systems, in a continually shifting policy and delivery environment, with new evidence and profile of social needs coming to light – makes it vital that creativity and innovation is not replaced with process. Revolving Doors has continued to challenge itself on whether its analysis and focus is right and continually checks its models against existing best practice.

Revolving Doors’ approach of identifying principles and applying them flexibly through partnerships has allowed room for continual testing and creativity. This has prevented the organisation getting stuck with one idea and applying it blindly, but it has required continual reflection on what works. Resisting the temptation to invest in one solution creates continual adjustment of thinking, and this has had to be reflected in the capacity of the organisation, which needs the space and structures to support such a process.

This flexible consultancy model is not typical of voluntary sector practice. However, Revolving Doors has shown that a charity can grow and enrich a body of knowledge and experience and can apply it through a responsive consultancy model in the pursuit of a single mission. This has required considerable trust from charitable funders, as it departs radically from the ‘acorn to oak’ paradigm. Revolving Doors effectively moved beyond the claim that Link Working is a ‘silver bullet’ for the problems of vulnerable people in the criminal justice system,

despite significant external expectation that it should remain exclusively committed to Link Working. It now believes that being known for constant enquiry is ultimately much more credible for an organisation working with complex problems than being known for marketing 'the answer'.

7. Willingness and capacity to change organisationally

The shape of Revolving Doors Agency has changed radically several times, from predominantly research, through to service delivery, through to a multi-disciplinary combination of research, policy and development. Staff numbers have also fluctuated dramatically, from four to thirty five, and back to twelve. Throughout this flux, Revolving Doors has been lucky in accessing resources at key moments to fund the capacity and expertise needed to support change.

The different challenges of replication, from early pioneering through to roll-out and dissemination, have required very different skills and motivations from staff. Revolving Doors has been lucky that the process has been led by three different CEOs in fifteen years, each of whom picked up and led a very different stage, and who were chosen for their different skills. These different leadership phases have also been underlined by a three-year cycle of 'root and branch' reviews of organisational strategy.

Perhaps most critically, however, was the role of the Board of Trustees. Their capacity to step back and make mission-led

decisions that could sometimes run counter to internal vested interests was vital in keeping Revolving Doors' replication agenda on track. This ability to maintain the overall journey, outside of the day-to-day motivations of individual staff, allowed the organisation to keep transforming itself into the organisation it needed to be for the next step

Conclusion

Revolving Doors replication journey is distinctive to the type of social problem it has been attempting to address. Each stage has happened in response to the (often painful) learning from the last, and has required the organisation to dig deep to keep the mission central to the process. These changes have sometimes obscured the primary task of the organisation and led to mission-drift and mistakes. Perhaps the most important transferable learning, therefore, is that very close partnership relationships were needed with funders in order to hold and manage the many risks. Without these, not only would the capacity have been wanting, but the organisation would not have had the confidence to keep taking difficult but necessary risks.

References

- Helen Jones, *Revolving Doors: Report of the Telethon Inquiry into the relationship between mental health, homelessness and the criminal justice system*, 1992.
- Social Exclusion Task Force, *Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion*, 2006.

Annex: The National Development Programme

Revolving Doors' new approach to replication is currently being trialled through its National Development Programme. This is using national funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Lloyds TSB Foundation and the Government's Health and Offender Partnerships Directorate to help Revolving Doors engage in a ground-up approach to developing innovation in several new areas.

The National Development Programme aims to establish at least one support project in every English region and Wales for people with unmet mental health needs in the criminal justice system.

As the first stage, Revolving Doors is conducting a series of regional analyses to establish specific needs and gaps in support for this target group. This data will then form the basis of negotiations with local commissioners in order to develop pilot projects. The format and focus of each pilot will be determined by the findings of the needs analyses. The pilots will operate in partnership with existing local service providers, with evaluation supplied by Revolving Doors.

Revolving Doors has extended itself organisationally by establishing a network of expert consultants, based in each English region and Wales. The consultants provide a crucial linkage between Revolving Doors' central hub of experience and knowledge and the credibility and local relationships needed in each area.

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