

Capture staff knowledge before they retire, quit



Diane Ziegler

Given the impending mass exodus of Baby Boomers from the workforce, salvaging the “deep smarts” — the institutional knowledge — of employees before they leave their positions should be a priority for corporate, nonprofit and government executives everywhere.

The benefits of capturing employee knowledge successfully are clear: reduced costs, improved quality and innovation, faster learning, less time looking for information, and increased value to customers and clients.

But how do we capture what people have learned through years of experience? Better yet, how do we encourage knowledge-sharing on an ongoing basis so that we not only avoid losing knowledge, but also leverage it better each day?

Knowing what to share

First, we must understand what knowledge we need to capture and share. Tacit knowledge — that learned and perfected by experience — is the hardest to identify, capture and share. It is knowing how to bump the copy machine so it will make a copy, what person in another department can expedite your customer’s request or how to read a room in a sales presentation.

Employees can identify critical moments in learning, transfers of information or needs for information to help identify what these pieces of tacit knowledge are.

Second, determine the best way to capture and share the knowledge. Some organizations create internal “yellow pages” that profile employees and their expertise. Other organizations develop databases of best practices. Still others write white papers to summarize project insights. But knowledge-sharing is more than a database of best practices, tapes of employee interviews or other collections of information. Knowledge should result in an increased capacity for effective action.

It may be process-oriented, as well. Processes for sharing knowledge may include interactions

such as shadowing, joint problem-solving, mentoring, learning labs, cross-training, employee social events and communities of practice. Systems that can aid in knowledge-sharing include networks and databases.

Expect resistance

Third, start small. Knowledge sharing is best done first in small groups to determine what works best. That method provides a manageable context for the trial-and-error process of learning how to drive future knowledge-sharing processes most effectively.

Small groups are also a good starting point in that knowledge-sharing typically involves a culture change. The organization is moving away from encouraging individuals to control and possess information and beginning to reward them for sharing information. New behaviors to support knowledge-sharing can be identified more easily in a small group and strategies developed to encourage them as the initiative grows.

Finally, prepare for resistance and have strategies in place to proactively and positively handle objections and concerns. Objections usually arise out of uncertainty as change demands that individuals do more without expectation of an immediate result. “We are reinventing the wheel,” “we didn’t create this and we don’t want to use it,” “we don’t need this” are some of the resistance that may be expressed. Individuals will challenge out of fear and anxiety.

The absence of internal systems and communities for sharing knowledge will also be sources of strong resistance until enough of them have been developed and created to begin to show the impacts of change.

Overcoming obstacles to knowledge sharing requires starting small and building out. Leaders must look for opportunities where immediate leverage lies, plan effectively, understand needs, communicate successes and be willing to invest for the long haul.

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