

Knowledge in Action - Issue 18

Retaining expertise in organisations

With rapidly increasing professional competition for talent, an era of corporate restructuring and a generation of baby boomers about to retire, organisations are rightly concerned about losing expertise.

Research from Henley's Knowledge Management Forum examines the tools and techniques that will enable organisations to effectively retain this expertise, whether through knowledge handovers or building a learning organisation.



Competition in professional work has never been keener. At the same time organisations are engaging in dramatic restructuring, whether through reducing headcount or outsourcing work. Add to that the current crop of baby boomers reaching retirement and you get an outflow of knowledge as experienced, skilled individuals depart each organisation. The question is therefore how you retain this knowledge.

By far the most common and often the most realistic approach for many organisations is to facilitate a handover of knowledge as the individual prepares to leave the business, either after they hand in their notice or as they approach retirement age. The research identified a number of approaches and tools which can be effectively applied to facilitate this. Some will involve a handover to a successor, while others will hand over to the organisation as a whole. The tools can be applied to each type of knowledge exchange.

Transferring knowledge

These handovers need to encompass the passing on of two things: the employee's broad knowledge needed for the job and their specialist expertise. This knowledge includes things like technical knowledge of their domain, such as emerging directions in their field, promising technologies and the operation of tools and processes. It also includes organisational knowledge of who is involved in decisions, relationships between departments and internal and external resources. In addition it covers analytic knowledge of theories, frameworks and guidelines relevant to their role.

“We used a variety of tools from this project. We had a senior individual moving on, so we developed a relationship map of his key contacts. We also held a Question Time piece, a technical exchange focused on particular topics and a session around operational and process knowledge. We are also starting work on improving knowledge retention on a day-to-day basis, so this isn't just addressed when people leave.”

Sindy Grewal, head of knowledge, Audit Commission



Without knowledge transfer it becomes difficult to do even the basic elements of the job, as the new job holder may lack the knowledge of things like: where key information is stored; relevant passwords; contacts; and the hidden tricks of using certain physical or analytical tools. On an organisational level, if a large number of individuals leave together this can leave a business with a critical gap in its capabilities.

Continuity tools

This kind of information and knowledge is best passed on through continuity tools. In the past many organisations have used video or audio tape interviews. However, the research found that most of these are rarely used by remaining employees.

Alternatives that were found to be useful included career or skills frameworks. Organisations can analyse the skill profiles of departing and remaining staff and use the career framework to anticipate skills gaps. They can also be used to understand critical skill areas in the organisation.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

This report is drawn from a research project headed by Dr Richard McDermott of McDermott Consulting, with Dr Christine van Winkelen of Henley Business School. It was based on the analysis of the experience of a number of organisations, including Shell Oil, Northrop Grumman, Unilever and NASA. The working group included a number of Forum members, among them Cadbury Schweppes, Oracle and the Department of Health.

Questions to think about in planning individual knowledge handovers

To transfer knowledge before retiring or rotating staff leave involves thinking through the following questions.

1. What is the 'at risk' knowledge and skills? Not all knowledge is equally important to the business.
2. How critical is the loss of that knowledge?
3. Who are the users of this knowledge and what is the information they will need?
4. What is your intent? Do you need to capture knowledge the successor will need? Do you need to get experts to teach others how they diagnose and solve technical problems?
5. How difficult are the skills learning practitioners will need to develop? How much practice and customisation will be necessary?
6. What expertise sharing approach will be the most natural fit with your culture?
7. How many different approaches could you pilot?
8. What support will you need from the organisation to pilot the approach?
9. What do you need to do to prepare the departing expert so they focus on the right content?
10. If your aim is continuity, create guidelines and job aids for successors rather than simply recording the sessions. This puts the captured knowledge in the framework of the user rather than the producer.

Exit interviews are also highly valuable when they are done well. These can involve a series of interviews covering key processes, bodies of knowledge, contacts, tools, tips, associations and databases. The knowledge managers involved then produce a summary for the new job holder. While this is time consuming, those who conducted these exercises found them highly useful.

Expert seminars also have a role. The departing member of staff, together with a skilled facilitator, can hold seminars for remaining staff on key topics.

Passing on expertise

These tools can transfer many kinds of knowledge, but other approaches are required to enable the passing on of deeper expertise. This expertise is made up of skills such as the ability to analyse and solve problems, make connections and identify opportunities within the field. This is much more intuitive and therefore is much more difficult to capture and document.

This requires transfer through 'thinking' tools, which rather than focusing on documentation, exposes remaining staff to the thinking and insights of departing members of staff. This can include structured discussions with learning practitioners, bringing to the fore how they think about handling specific situations.

This can be done in a number of ways. It may include 'An audience with...' sessions, following the idea of the television programme, where the departing expert can be interviewed by a collection of their peers and newer practitioners. The facilitator will interview the departing member of staff prior to the event in order to identify the overall areas to emphasise. An assistant then collects the questions and ensures they focus on these areas.

"MWH's world-renowned expert on Pipelines was nearing retirement and we needed to ensure that his knowledge was transferred. An engineer worked alongside him for the five years before his retirement, sharing knowledge and getting an in-depth understanding of his expertise. She is now a world-renowned expert herself and, importantly, she is now passing her knowledge on to a new group of engineers."

Sarah Grimwood, E-A knowledge manager, MWH



Another approach is network development. This is a meeting with the departing staff member, their peers, those from other projects and newer employees. The expert is asked to think through a set of work processes to be discussed at the meeting. The interview starts with the expert describing the processes and then their peers are free to ask questions.

Mini-simulations may also be successful, posing a dilemma that learning practitioners need to resolve. This is followed up with discussions among community members and trainers. The same kind of thing can be achieved through case studies, where a departing staff member can talk through a case study with their peers.

Success has also been achieved through masterclasses, which are a series of discussions in which employees at varying levels of expertise and experience collectively think through a technical problem, with the help of a facilitator, learning from the expert.

“It’s a question of identifying where critical knowledge lies and putting in a plan for strategic knowledge transfer. It is not something that can be achieved in a one-hour knowledge download. A lot of organisations already have tools such as communities of practice, which are one of the most natural ways of transferring knowledge. Others make a virtue of their alumni.”

Chris Collison, author and consultant



More sophisticated tools explored in the research included a computer-generated map of individual expertise, which displays in a graphical format how the expert sees their field. Another tool was a simulation that incorporated insights from experienced staff, which was aimed at developing less experienced colleagues.

Learning organisation

But a handover of knowledge on departure is not the only approach. Organisations can also look towards a more long-term holistic solution, of developing a knowledge culture, where knowledge sharing and expertise development is integrated into the fabric of organisations. In this environment knowledge is transferred throughout an individual’s career to the organisation, which therefore becomes less reliant on the knowledge of key individuals.

Success in this area involves a combination of four factors: senior management engagement in developing organisational knowledge; employee engagement in developing knowledge and expertise; specific responsibility assigned for developing knowledge and expertise; and the building of trusting relationships between employees so that they are willing to learn from each other.

In certain types of organisation the nature of the business model is that the individuals do the work rather than groups, so the organisation does rely on individuals. However, where this doesn’t apply, a learning culture that genuinely builds knowledge into how work gets done creates a context that encourages sharing of deep expertise. It means the departure of employees, however quick or unexpected, does not risk the loss of essential knowledge for the business. That alone makes it a model worthy of consideration.

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Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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