



PAY ATTENTION TO KNOWLEDGE RETENTION

The concept of passing along information to the next generation is as old as when a Cro-Magnon scratched petroglyphs on a cave wall. While some corporations' efforts at knowledge retention are just as primitive today, most understand the innate need to preserve and pass along hard-earned knowledge. After all, it's an asset that they typically spend a lot of money to create.

Although the cost of lost knowledge and intellectual capital through reductions-in-force and retirement is an issue that has been well-documented in recent years, it remains difficult to both quantify and overstate. I've personally had recent conversations with companies in certain industries about their concern that an older workforce presents significant risks in terms of future knowledge loss. And as a result of the recent recession this concern has been compounded by unexpected layoffs, early retirement buy-outs and other attrition. Increasingly as the economy recovers, there's concern about the

more subtle sources of knowledge loss precipitated by increasing workforce mobility, flexible work arrangements and use of contingent workers.

Yet, despite these concerns, knowledge retention is not widely practiced in most organizations today.

Why? Lack of time, perception that knowledge retention is not a priority of senior leadership, inadequate resources allocated for knowledge retention, difficulty in measuring ROI and lack of consensus on who is responsible for knowledge retention were commonly cited factors in a study of 426 organizations.

The study focuses on the differences between High Performing Organizations (HPOs) – those that excel in revenue, profitability, market share and customer satisfaction – vs. Low Performing Organizations (LPOs). HPOs (48 percent) have a much better handle on identifying individuals and roles at risk for knowledge loss within the coming five years

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than do LPOs (30 percent) and are, therefore, better-positioned to confront it. HPOs consistently outstrip the competition in knowing where their knowledge resides, (54 percent compared to 35 percent), where the knowledge hubs – teams or individuals who are most effective at gathering and disseminating knowledge – reside (53 percent compared to 30 percent), and in having awareness of where critical knowledge deficiencies lie (32 percent versus 15 percent).

Effective knowledge retention can build bridges for better communication, fuel innovation and boost productivity. The key is to foster a culture that doesn't horde knowledge, but instead freely shares it.

Yeah, I know. Easier said than done.

Let's take a look at what a few HPOs are doing to foster this kind of culture.

3M: Known for innovation, the company is committed to storytelling with purpose. Presented primarily by those nearing retirement with the goal of tacit-to-explicit knowledge transfer, it helps

to develop decision trees for worst case scenarios and what 3M calls problem-solving rationale maps.

SaskTel: One of Canada's largest telecommunications companies, SaskTel is incorporating knowledge retention elements into its annual talent review discussions with executives. "One area of focus within the talent pool is to identify individuals who are 'specialists' (they have in-depth job knowledge and expertise that is critical to the organization) and ensure knowledge transfer plans are established," says HR manager Debbie Johnson.

Northrop Grumman: An off-the-shelf software program allows project managers to design a system for safeguarding and storing documents integral to getting work done. As part of their regular daily routine, engineers store all their reports and other written materials in the central database. "Before, if a person left, we typically would find ourselves trying to dig stuff out of their local computer, without much success," said a Northrop

Grumman project manager.

Deere & Co.: Through communities of practice, the company created an online network where employees can share information in their fields of expertise. Workers are encouraged to enter their data into an "internal resume," a searchable database that anyone can access and easily navigate.

As these companies have done, ultimately knowledge retention activities must become part of the basic infrastructure of an organization – of its DNA – and ingrained in the culture, beginning with the first day of each new hire's employment and spanning the full range of their tenure. Wherever your organization is in terms of actively preserving and conveying knowledge, now's a good time to revisit this concept. To borrow a well-worn phrase from Geico, some things are so easy to implement, "Even a caveman could do it."

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