English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon famously said that knowledge is power. Those words couldn’t be any truer in today’s information-rich environment. In any organization, particularly those where highly customized work is performed by individuals or project teams, access to information can help an organization grow and develop their people, enhance their processes and achieve economic ambitions. Although each business or project may vary, the need for retaining, sharing and even discarding information is ongoing.
This is perhaps most relevant during times of organizational change. Whether a managerial change, a shift in business strategy, or an acquisition or merger, learning leaders are often responsible for determining which types of information and knowledge are critical, where this information resides, and how best to disseminate it across the organization. This can prove a daunting task, particularly when certain knowledge, processes and procedures have become embedded into the culture of an organization.

**WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL FORGETTING?**

To better understand and mitigate these challenges, organizations need to have a better grasp on how information is discarded both intentionally and unintentionally. The term “organizational forgetting,” coined by scholars Pablo Martin de Holan and Nelson Phillips, offers an organizational view of forgetting that is categorized along two dimensions. The first dimension, “Modes of Forgetting,” makes the distinction between forgetting that is accidental and that which is intentional. The second dimension, called “Source of Knowledge,” is the difference between existing knowledge and new knowledge in the organization. (See Figure 1.)

Organizations can forget in four ways: memory decay, unlearning, failure to capture, and avoiding bad habits. Conceptually, the four modes of forgetting are discrete categories, but in reality, the modes overlap and intersect with each other. To help learning and development professionals circumvent the pitfalls of organizational forgetting, let’s examine how forgetting manifests itself and the associated implications for each mode.

**WHEN ALL IS FORGOTTEN**

Organizational memory plays a key role in learning and development in both theory and practice. In order for an organization to learn new knowledge and make it accessible to its members, knowledge must be stored in the memory system of that organization, according to Andrea Casey and Fernando Olivera in the article “Reflections on Organizational Memory and Forgetting.” Memory decay is the unintended deterioration of knowledge after it has become entrenched in the structures (e.g., databases) and culture (e.g., routines, values) of the organization. If that knowledge is lost, it cannot be used to influence current decisions.

Examples of memory decay include the routines and structures in organizations that change over time. For instance, as part of the process for rolling out a new content management system, the IT department at one college created checklists for each part of the design, development and delivery. These checklists, which aligned with the specifications and requirements of each department, were used to guide IT project team members. As the needs of the project, department, or the college changed – or as the technology evolves – so do the checklists. Over time, these checklists are far from their original versions. Without a versioning process in place, and a vehicle for storing previous versions, the IT department would have lost the knowledge of how this type of implementation used to be done, and the rationale behind it.

Processes naturally degrade over time as organizations grow and employees come and go. In order to meet the needs of stakeholders, organizations should continually re-evaluate and update their processes. Memory decay can be detrimental, particularly if change is occurring rapidly or without proper management direction and support. Sometimes the values, goals and strategy of the organization become muddled in these transitional stages, losing sight of information that may be most vital for business success.

**THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**

A more familiar scenario may be the unintentional loss of knowledge resulting from employees leaving the company, disbanding work teams, or failing to record solutions to business or customer challenges. In many matrix organizations, individuals work as part of project teams for a prescribed period of time, and then they are dispersed to other projects. Absent a vehicle for capturing project details, lessons learned, challenges and solutions, or relevant tools and templates, the ability to share knowledge is significantly reduced. This loss is
DURING TIMES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Your company’s culture is a critical component for success. It can be a selling feature for prospective employees, a driver of innovation and growth, and the “tie that binds.” So, in times of change, don’t underestimate the emotional attachment that employees – or clients – may have to the “old way” of doing things.

We all recognize the importance of stakeholder buy-in, but this means more than a verbal acknowledgement. Make sure that influencers in your organization are aware of the critical role they play in reinforcing business decisions and reminding employees of new practices and procedures. Consistent visual reminders – whether graphics, charts or checklists – are also helpful.

Transparency is key. Employees will inevitably be involved in the change initiative, but they must first be informed. Alert employees early on about what changes to expect, how their roles and responsibilities may transform and where they can go to find out more information. If knowledge isn’t shared forthright, employees will make their own assumptions or continue to employ existing processes and information.

known as failure to capture. The disadvantage this loss of knowledge creates is twofold. First, the organization needs to invest resources (i.e., time, people, money) to recreate what has already been done, and second, different employees or teams miss the opportunity to learn from others’ experience.

Most organizations have experienced the loss of a seasoned sales executive or account manager – one that had all the tribal knowledge — the details of the company’s major accounts, the procedures they preferred, and the people to approach to get things done. These professionals may capture account details in Salesforce or even train others, but oftentimes the most pertinent information still resides within them when they leave. For both memory decay and failure to capture, organizations can moderate this information loss by identifying and creating repositories for storing information for future use, and establishing proper procedures and accountability for each department.

OUT WITH THE OLD

On the other side of the coin, the intentional removal of firmly ingrained knowledge that is detrimental to the organization is known as unlearning. Unlearning is a common phenomenon that occurs when an organization is acquired. One example from an acquisition in the pharmaceutical industry involved the performance management process. Managers in the acquired organization conducted performance reviews with the entire employee population every six months, using value- and sales-based metrics. However, as part of the assimilation process into the acquiring organization, that process transitioned into quarterly reviews, with a new evaluation format and varying developmental measures. As a result, managers in the acquired organization had to unlearn how they conducted reviews before they could learn the new tools and processes for conducting quarterly reviews. According to the Journal of Organizational Change Management, to support unlearning an organization must de-institutionalize established beliefs and routines in order to replace them with new ones.

A sizeable hurdle exists when organizational leaders (at any level) refuse to reinforce or implement new methods or ideas, instead clinging to entrenched processes and procedures. Some will latch on to the “way we’ve always done it,” looking for a constant in a time of organizational transformation. Continually reinforcing new routines will increase their likelihood of being accepted and embedded into the fabric of the firm. Learning leaders and change advocates must always engage employees early and often, ensuring that changes are supported by management and organizational leadership.

IN WITH THE NEW

Away from the watchful eye of the learning and development department, new employees often mimic the behaviors of those around them. Unfortunately, this often unravels the work invested in teaching new employees the correct policies, processes and procedures. These bad habits can potentially lead to a loss of productivity or quality in client deliverables, which in turn can cost the organization current and future revenue. Avoiding bad habits involves intentionally preventing new, counterproductive knowledge from penetrating an organization, which requires establishing structures and routines before that knowledge becomes integrated, as Martin de Holan and Philips pointed out.

As an example, when call center employees in a software company go through orientation, they have the opportunity to shadow other call center employees. From their observations, new employees often take away tactics that are unapproved and off script, but that seem more effective and more efficient. New employees want to experience success from the start, so they will try the methods they observed. If the result is positive, they will use this method more often – regardless of whether it is correct.

The best way to mitigate this issue is to provide increased support for new employees after completing orientation. Even for seasoned employees, mentors and coaches can be sources of valuable knowledge, and can also emphasize the correct procedures and hinder bad habits from forming. As a learning leader, continuously offer support and ongoing training and development opportunities for new and seasoned employees, and identify exemplars that employees can consult for additional guidance.

SUMMARY

While the phrase, “our people are our most important asset,” holds true in many organizations, their true value may lie in the knowledge and information they possess. This wealth of information comprises the memory system of an organization, and if managed appropriately, will store keys from past successes, and open doors for future growth.

Tracy Lowrance is the manager of organizational and professional development at Clarkston Consulting. She has spent more than 15 years working with large organizations in higher education, financial services, healthcare, retail and federal government on change management and leadership development initiatives. Email Tracy.