

Capturing the Lessons of Experience: Knowledge Transfer: 12 Strategies for Succession Management

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The world faces a quiet crisis of aging. (See **Figure 1**.) While that topic is not as dramatic as the war on terrorism, its implications may be more profound. At the moment, the number of people opting for retirement has remained manageable, probably because pensions have been heavily invested in poorly performing mutual funds. But as the stock market improves, many organizations may face a retirement tidal wave that catches them off guard. Even now many organizations are scurrying to put into place succession management programs to help them prepare a new generation at every organizational level.

But, as decision-makers ponder how to prepare for many people retiring at once, they face a related problem: How can they preserve the institutional memory of long-service workers and transfer that knowledge? Without paying attention to that, many organizations may find themselves ill equipped in the future to perform routine — let alone mission-critical — tasks.

But what is this problem? What strategies may be used to solve it? This article addresses these questions.

Understanding the Problem

How can organizations store and transfer the lessons learned from their most experienced workers before they retire? That is the question of the moment for many public sector employers. To cite just two examples:

- How can a government agency that is responsible for building and maintaining highways preserve the special knowledge necessary to repair bridges when all of its engineers are eligible for retirement?
- How can a hospital provide uninterrupted health services when all the doctors in the rural community who have specialized in childbirth are nearing retirement?

Possible Strategies for Knowledge Storage and Transfer

So, what strategies should an organization undertake to store and transmit the institutional memory that is often vested in its most experienced performers? To address this challenge, many organizations have formed special task forces. These task forces may suggest that several strategies should be used, including the following.

Strategy 1: Job-Shadowing Programs. A job-shadowing program is one strategy by which to transfer knowledge from one person or group to another. A less-experienced performer is paired up with a veteran performer. The veteran is asked to share knowledge (and perhaps hands-on practice) in dealing with the most difficult situations with which he or she has been faced on the job.

Strategy 2: Communities of Practice. A community of practice is a group that comes together to share information about a common problem, issue or topic. Such communities may meet in person or online. It is a way by which to store and transmit knowledge from one person (or a group) to another person or group.

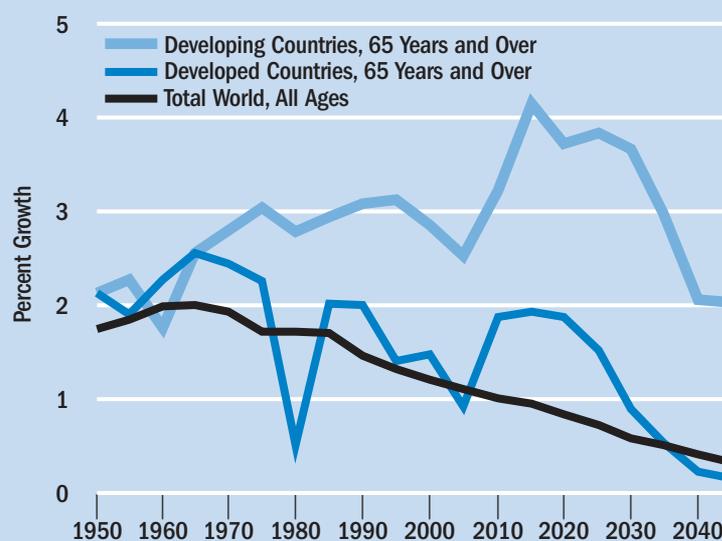
Strategy 3: Process Documentation. Popular as a result of ISO and the quality movement, process documentation involves flowcharting how work is performed. It may include special variations in what performers should do or how they should do it based on special circumstances. Clear process documentation, which may include flowcharts or procedure manuals, can be helpful in storing and transferring knowledge from a more experienced to a less experienced person.

Strategy 4: Critical Incident Interviews or Questionnaires. First described in the 1950s, the critical incident method takes its

name from tapping the lessons of experience. A critical incident is a difficult (critical) situation (incident). By documenting the lessons of experience from the organization's most experienced performers, the organization can capture the fruits of experience. Of course, by documenting such "difficult cases"—and how they were handled—the organization is also laying the foundation for the development of a manual or automated expert system. Critical incidents provide an excellent foundation for training. An example of a possible questionnaire that is designed to capture critical incidents appears in **Figure 2**.

Strategy 5: Expert Systems. An expert system, usually automated, is organized around problems and how to troubleshoot them. A simple example is the "context-sensitive help" on most word processing programs. (If you should ever call in to the help desk of a major computer company for help, the person on the other end of the phone is probably equipped with an expert system.) Common

Figure 1: Average Annual Percent Growth of Elderly Population in Developed and Developing Countries



Source: Kinesella, K., & Velkoff, V. (2001). *An aging world: 2001*. Series P95/01-1. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 9.

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Figure 2: A Questionnaire to Capture Critical Incident Knowledge

Directions to HR Professionals: Use this questionnaire to capture the lessons from your organization's most experienced performers—particularly before they retire. Send them the questionnaire by e-mail or by paper and ask them to complete and return it. Then identify key themes from all the questionnaires and be sure to build ways to diffuse that knowledge throughout the organization, and to less experienced workers, through training or through a manual or automated expert system.

Directions to Workers: Before you leave this organization for retirement, we need your help. You have valuable knowledge that could help other people avoid the pitfalls you may have fallen into as you learned and gained experience. Please take time to answer the following questions and return to [name of person] at [location/e-mail address] by [date].

Question 1 What is the most difficult situation you have faced in your current job in this organization? Please describe the situation—when it occurred, who was involved (no names please, just job titles), and what you did in this situation step-by-step. (Please answer in the space below; add extra paper if necessary.)

Question 2 What happened as a result of what you did? In other words, what were the consequences of your actions? (Please answer in the space below; add extra paper if necessary.)

Question 3 If you confronted this situation again, how would you handle it? Would you do exactly what you did—or would you use a different approach? If you would use a different approach, please describe what it would be and why you would use that approach. (Please answer in the space below—and add extra paper if necessary.)

or difficult problems are logged into the system. Advice about troubleshooting and solving those problems is also provided in the system. This approach, while requiring more technological sophistication, places information at the fingertips of even the least experienced performer, giving him or her the ability to perform like a pro.

Strategy 6: Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS). Perhaps most sophisticated of all methods for storing and transferring knowledge is a so-called electronic performance support system (EPSS). An EPSS combines artificial intelligence, an expert system, real-time e-learning methods, and a computer-based referencing system. As a user encounters a problem, he or she can access all organizational policies and procedures through the referencing system, gain advice from past experience from the expert system, and even learn in real time using the training component.

Strategy 7: Job Aids. A job aid is anything that helps people perform in real time. A checklist is a job aid. So is a sign. Knowledge can be stored in the job aid and accessed through low-tech methods by performers when the need arises.

Strategy 8: Storyboards. A storyboard is literally a group of pictures that tell a story. Think of a series of pictures placed on a wall or a poster that is intended to show how someone should perform in a specific situation and you get the idea. For instance, if you were trying to show someone how to perform the Heimlich maneuver, you could storyboard it. The same technique can be applied to other procedures to provide a graphic representation of what to do and how to do it. Thus, storyboards can be used in storing and transferring knowledge.

Strategy 9: Mentoring Programs. A mentor is an experienced performer; a mentee is a less-experienced one. Rarely is a mentor a supervisor, since effective mentors should usually have no selfish interest in the development of another person. Successful people have usually had one or more mentors in their career, and mentors offer advice on what to do, how to do it and why it is worth doing in a situation. Such programs can, of course, facilitate knowledge transfer.

Strategy 10: Storytelling. Most wisdom in organizations is passed on through storytelling. A story is a description of what happened in a situation. Most people have heard many stories about their organizations. If you hear “what really happened” in a promotion, demotion, termination or transfer, you are hearing a story. Storytelling is less structured than critical incidents but can serve the same ends. It can be a most effective way of transmitting wisdom from one person to another.

Strategy 11: Information Exchanges. Have you ever attended a career fair? If you have, you have seen one form of information exchange. The same basic approach can be turned to information exchanges. When this strategy is used, veteran performers sit at booths and dispense wisdom to less-experienced performers who visit them.

Strategy 12: Best Practice Studies or Meetings. Too often we assume that best practices occur outside our organizations. But it is possible that the organization has its own existing best practices. These can be shared in meetings.

Other Approaches. There are, of course, other ways to store and/or transfer knowledge than the 12 strategies listed above. One way to capture the lessons of experience is for the organization's decision-makers to do better than they have historically done in tapping their retiree base. Individuals with valuable knowledge can be placed on retainer to provide one-on-one phone guidance—or even online or video-conferenced advice—to less-experienced workers as they face problems. Managing the retiree base of the organization may prove to be an important trend of the future.

Conclusion

As individuals retire, organizations face the loss of key intellectual talent and the loss of institutional memory for solving problems. Many organizations are now facing this challenge. The ideas presented here provide several strategies for solving this problem.

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