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
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 performers, 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.)

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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