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Knowledge retention

Replacing the traditional exit interview

One of the crucial organisational challenges facing us in 2006 and beyond is the undeniable fact that a lot of the working population is coming up to retirement age or already eligible for companies' retirement schemes. In his book on the subject of *Lost Knowledge*, David DeLong illustrates this point arguing that fully 50% of NASA employees will be eligible for retirement this year should they wish to do so. NASA, on the other hand, hasn't yet developed a strategy for dealing with this problem. Even if they could recruit sufficient numbers of young scientists, they could not replace the experiences or the knowledge of the retirees. Despite US government ambitions to reinvigorate a campaign to land people on the moon, DeLong argues that NASA's knowledge retention problem means that it literally does not know how to achieve that goal. Previous processes and procedures were not well documented and the people are already retired or moved on – the knowledge is lost.

Even with normal staff attrition and especially in sectors facing re-structuring and or downsizing, most organisations will need to find ways of addressing this serious organisational crisis, if not this year, certainly within a short period of time. The loss of knowledge has implications for learning and development professionals, as strategies will need to be developed to accelerate the learning curve of any new staff as well as attempt to contribute to the existing corporate memory, where it exists. HRD staff can assist in a process of identifying new learning and development programmes for individuals, teams and at the organisational level itself.

Traditionally, organisations undertake exit interviews with staff that are about to leave. These tend to focus on typical HR issues, such as the reasons for moving on and what they liked or did not like about their time as employees. The results of these interviews can help to arm HR departments with information that can assist the retention of staff – a laudable strategy given the above scenario. However, they rarely, if ever, provide sufficient material to address the key problem. That is, they should not be about a loss of that person's capacity to undertake the role – a capacity that can be replaced by a new recruit - but about the loss of knowledge to the organisation. This loss can take many years to replace. The problem is exacerbated when the person is regarded as an expert in their field, either though skills and qualifications or simply through length of time in employment.

Of primary importance is the identification of the key knowledge areas that your organisation needs to retain. Are they domain specific? In other words, are they technically specific to certain tasks or roles? Are they procedural, relating to systems and processes? Are they social – embedded in individual relationships with internal staff and external contacts? Whatever the knowledge area, you need to assess the impact of the potential loss to your organisation.

Should that impact analysis suggest that efforts to retain at least some of that knowledge would be beneficial, there are some options open to you as to how to undertake a new form of exit interview – a knowledge debrief.

There are a large number of potential deliverables available to you, including job manuals, case studies, stories, best practices, top 5 knowledge assets etc. Once you know the focus (technical, procedural, social, amongst others), you need to decide how the results of the debrief will manifest themselves. This decision will be based on your understanding of how best to ensure that others in the organisation are able to access the results in ways that are meaningful to them. Examples include Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and metadocuments.

If you already have an intranet with sets of FAQs, then this might be one way of structuring the results and consequently will inform your approach to getting the answers. By definition, these may not necessarily be 'frequently asked' and are more strictly 'most anticipated' questions. However, FAQs are so predominant on the Internet that the term will be familiar to your employees. If you have a content management system, those FAQs can be stored using metadata that people are familiar with. If you don't use a content management system, then it might be sensible to approach the debrief with a metadocument in mind.

Metadocuments are simply, highest-level documents. These contain as much relevant information about a person's knowledge and experience as possible. By inserting hyperlinks into key phrases, projects, people's names etc, access to more detail is made available at the click of a mouse. The keys to their success are fourfold in that they are:

- Simple to design, often being no more than one side of an A4 document in WORD, or other MS Office tool.
- Linked to the knowledge areas that concern the organisation.
- Visible to staff – or least they know where to find it.
- Provide access to further information through their hyperlinks despite the possibilities that the files are stored in different drives and directories. Of course, any cleansing of directories from time to time will necessitate re-editing the metadocument.

The knowledge debrief process clearly requires facilitation and the explicit alignment with the induction of new staff and / or the diffusion of the knowledge amongst remaining staff. Any perceived 'lost' knowledge may require an explicit approach to support other staff members to acquire such knowledge within their own professional development process. Is this not a role for HRD professionals? If not you, then who?

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