



Buried treasure

The knowledge held by employees is a treasure trove no business should overlook. Helen McPhun stresses the importance of an organisation having a strategy to both maintain and retain its knowledge.

Imagine you are on a wild adventure and have a glass jar in which you collect the flawless diamonds, unusual rocks and coloured sand you see on your journey. You keenly set out each day to collect as many examples as possible, especially the flawless diamonds! However, no matter how hard you try, the jar cannot become full. Items disappear each night, sometimes the rocks, sometimes the sand and sometimes the diamonds—they simply vanish.

Your workplace probably experiences the same with the knowledge and skill in its competency bank. As employees leave the organisation they often take with them the diamonds of genius they created to analyse and process requirements. And no one else has learned that way to problem solve or to build consensus in difficult situations.

Some employees leave taking with them some of their knowledge and skill about the rock-solid processes they created. No one else really knows how to replicate them. The sands of understanding that help people grasp why a task is done the way it is may also leave when an employee leaves, and the perspective that helped grow all the changes is lost.

Some organisations rely heavily on formal training and development. People embark on programmes to learn better decision-making skills, to learn ways to systematise the processes, or to develop

better training, marketing, or management tools. Organisations pay a lot for this training.

On the other hand, informal learning occurs inside all organisations and people learn and develop processes to be more efficient and more productive.

Sadly, when people leave an organisation so too do their knowledge and skill. The person who leaves may be the only one who knows a process from start to finish. But if it was never documented, once that person leaves the company then time must be spent defining the process again from scratch.

Part of any sound business continuity plan covers a risk management plan for the organisation's knowledge and skill. In the event of a disaster, you may well have planned where to relocate the office and how to access office files from back-up data. You may even have a plan for how to provide a backup supply of electricity. But what happens if those who perform the tasks with the data and tools are not there? Who knows how to run the processes and do the tasks now?

You may have a sophisticated set of policies and procedures, but they may never have been tested by new minds with no experience in the context. These documents are traditionally written by those highly experienced in the company. The documents they create are sprinkled with healthy layers of acronyms, they frequently miss

details linked to each step, and they have procedural gaps because they assume everyone knows the other information.

Having documented procedures for every process and task in your workplace is the only way to transfer and retain knowledge that the company has already spent time and money developing.

Similarly, if you send people on training courses, there should be targeted goals. There should also be a way to measure post-course performance; however, that is rarely done. What's more, the new behavioural processes the trainee has learned are rarely documented and available as a future resource for others. Instead, the person learned great tips and techniques and kept them to themselves. If they leave, their new company benefits from the training you paid for and you are left with nothing! And, before long, someone else is sent off to the same course to learn the very same tips and techniques the company has already paid for but subsequently lost.

I recently delivered a first-line management programme where I asked each participant to identify a task or piece of knowledge or a process they knew that no one else at work really understood. I was quickly told of the young manager at a sports complex having to come in to work on his day off because three swimming pool filter lights were on and no one knew what to do.

Another person described how a colleague had worked well with a difficult client but, once that person had left, there was no one on the team with any idea of how to work with the client. The 'magical approach' she had used with the client was never shared. Then, another person described how 'Ted' was the only one who knew how to adjust the screen size so the PowerPoint was the same size as the screen.

Knowledge workers are usually the hub of most organisations and their experiences, judgements, ideas and interpretations keep your business moving forward. It is generally the workers who come up with the new processes and develop new strategies to keep you ahead of the competition. Workplaces are constantly creating and using new ideas, yet rarely are these adequately documented.

Measuring the creation of new knowledge is often considered difficult. It doesn't have to be. You need to develop a strategy to manage knowledge within your organisation. There needs to be a platform on which workers can share and collaborate with their colleagues. It is remiss for any organisation to have only one person able to do a specific task or know a certain process. What happens if that person leaves?

The way an organisation gathers and shares knowledge can be the key to how successfully it develops and grows. The challenge is harnessing the knowledge in a meaningful, coherent and usable way. Your organisation could have the following sources of business knowledge:

- Customer knowledge;
- Employee knowledge;
- Supplier knowledge;
- Market knowledge;
- Product knowledge;
- Process knowledge;
- Equipment knowledge;
- Research knowledge;
- Organisational memory.

A knowledge bank containing useful information and instructions on how to carry out key tasks is critical to the success of any organisation. You also need to have a knowledge champion in one or many areas. We often have a super user for our equipment or technology, but who is the super user for your knowledge bank?

A knowledge strategy that includes discovering, collating and sharing knowledge is important. To develop a knowledge strategy, think about how effective your business currently is at using its knowledge. Then, analyse your internal processes for gathering and sharing knowledge. Ask yourself how you can create a continuing process of knowledge management, acquisition and distribution so that it becomes a core to your business's strategy.

When you consider all the knowledge that sits inside your organisation today, think about how accessible it is and how well it is protected. You often hear that people are an organisation's greatest asset, but really it is what people know and how they use that knowledge that is the asset.

Some people are the true diamonds—they possess a wealth of extremely valuable knowledge. Others in the company hold the rock solid foundational knowledge that supports the organisation's processes. And then, shifting between them, are the smaller specks of knowledge, equally valuable but not as noticeable.

Like the explorer in the desert who keeps losing items from his precious collection, your organisation stands to lose items from its knowledge bank if it has not developed a strategy to secure its own treasured collection. However, unlike the explorer who can instantly see when a gem is missing, an organisation often wastes days and dollars before it realises its loss.

A knowledge strategy may take time to develop and implement, but once in place it will protect your organisation from loss and insure its future viability.

You know what you do but, if you leave, can someone else do what you know?

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