

Lost knowledge of departing experts – consequences and questions



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At the onset of 2016, with Traditionalists and Baby Boomers poised to leave organizations, are the next generation of workers equipped to run the show?

Why is this a question of importance? Surely, the new generation of Millennial and possible Generation Z mavericks possess modern knowledge enough to spearhead organizations in phenomenal directions. And yet, industries remain fearful of retirements.

It stemmed from the realization that between the intricacies of key client relationships and computer languages no longer being taught anywhere, many experienced workers possessed critical know-how that, if lost, would be expensive – if not impossible – for companies to replace. Some chose to call these employees –

Departing Experts

BP, British Multinational Oil and Gas Company, learnt a lesson on knowledge value the hard way when corrosion in the Prudhoe Bay pipeline – in 2006 – caused a small leak in the pipe. The resulting spill, the largest ever on Alaska's North Slope, forced BP to shut down the pipeline and the Prudhoe Bay Oilfield, the largest in the U. S. Overnight, 8% of domestic oil production was shut down due to extensive corrosion.

Audits revealed that by the time this massive pipeline spill was discovered, the job of BP's senior corrosion engineer had been left unfulfilled for more than a year. This hindered BP's ability to maintain strategic view of its corrosion prevention activities, costing them billions in a frenzy.

Why? Simply because, when Senior Corrosion Engineer Richard C. Woollam left, BP lost valuable intellectual capital in the form of his knowledge, experience and expertise.

This is still better than when NASA manager confessed in March of 2003, “ If we want to go to the moon again, we’ll be starting from scratch because all of that knowledge has disappeared.”

To dissect this into simpler terms, we are talking about knowledge that is neither stored, retrieved nor transferred. This is lost knowledge. The reason behind the name is better explained via the difference between the following:

1. Explicit Knowledge: Stored in database and manuals. Easily explained.
2. Tacit Knowledge: Includes experiences, stories, impressions and creative solutions. Accumulated over years, and is hence difficult to store and transfer.

In fact, some cite that tacit knowledge is difficult to verbalize even. Dorothy Leonard, Professor Emerita of Business Administration at Harvard, stated that some experts simply fail to realize that they have this in-demand tacit knowledge.

Now, this boils down to two questions:

Why Are You Replacing the Old by Hiring the New?

Tacit knowledge makes up a majority of lost knowledge, and is a big problem.

Now, the older generation, especially the Baby Boomers are defined by a unique character trait. They have, through the years, amassed a vast amount of knowledge, and have largely kept it to themselves.

It's been part of something called the "job protection" syndrome, which added value and importance to Boomers as individuals. The ideology was that if an employee was the only one in possession of knowledge of something important, then he or she was simply more valuable.

Even today, some Boomers are of firm belief that the younger employees ought to pay their dues, and learn via trial and error the same way they did. This transpires to a pattern we often see today, where prime focus is on recruiting younger employees, which inadvertently leads to ignoring value in the more mature workforce.

Adding younger employees is not a solution, albeit a cheap option. Simply because, it is impossible to throw people at a project and expect them to become productive. You will always require a smarter, more experienced skill base.

Do Executives Know of the Loss?

It's true that executives have little to no idea about what knowledge they are losing – from where and from whom.

An important first step should be to understand how the loss of an individual's specific knowledge impacts the company's strategic plans.

Will the loss of a salesperson affect revenues? Which divisions and departments have people of critical value approaching retirement? Is there
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any proof that these people are in possession of critical knowledge? What would be the overall impact on said organization?

These are questions to answer. The more clearly you articulate the cause of damage from Departing Experts to the company, the more likely you are to take strong and meaningful action.

While not all old knowledge is something of value equitable to treasure, it is important to identify what is. Archive those of less importance, and preserve those of more. There is little time to take charge, and if this still does not convince you, remember:

“ A people without the knowledge of their past, history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” - Marcus Garvey, Political Leader, Publisher, Journalist, Entrepreneur, and Orator.