

The New Brain Drain

As older workers leave, WLP pros can play a key role in reducing lost knowledge.

A WORKPLACE TREND and a demographic trend are converging to create a serious scenario for American businesses, says author and researcher David DeLong of MIT's AgeLab. DeLong, who has been studying the impact of information technology on skills and roles in the workplace for more than 20 years, recognized about five years ago that IT's impact was having a strong formative effect on the amount and type of knowledge that we generate at work. When combined with the reality of demographic trends that indicate the looming dimensions of baby-boomer retirement from the workforce, as well as many mid-career transitions for Generation X, the end result is massive quantities of invaluable, irreplaceable, specialized knowledge that's walking out employers' doors every day.

In one of his more sensational examples, DeLong tells the story of NASA, which has seen most—if not all—of the knowledge underpinning the 1969 lunar landing leave with the retirement of the Apollo project's engineers and administrators. "As NASA tries to fulfill the current administration's promise to return to the moon in the next decade, they are basically starting from scratch," he writes.

Fortunately, there's much that can be done to retain organizational knowledge, and human resource development and workplace learning and performance professionals can play leading roles in equipping their organizations to do so.

DeLong puts this news and much more forward in his recent book, *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce*. In it, he uses scenarios from organizations as diverse as NASA to a small medical practice to demonstrate the real and far-reaching implications of lost knowledge—and he proposes practical solutions to the problem.

The first hurdle, however, is getting organizational leadership to acknowl-

edge the threat and potential impact of lost knowledge. "Most of American business is totally in denial," he says. "And the situation is scary. People don't know what to do. But we can't give up just because it looks hard."

Rather than a programmatic approach, DeLong proposes a "comprehensive solution that involves multiple initiatives," and advocates beginning with a hard scan of the organization. "You've got to identify your real vulnerabilities," he says, by completing three major steps:

1. Determine what knowledge is most at risk.
2. Build sustained organizational support for knowledge retention.
3. Decide which initiatives to pursue first.

Having taken those steps, your organization is prepared to undertake its knowledge retention strategy. However, cautions DeLong, remember that organizational culture also plays a huge role in whether those efforts will be successful. For example, some corporate cultures reward the keeping of secrets through an internally competitive atmosphere. Some cultures have employees thinking that, if things don't go a bit haywire upon their departures, then perhaps they weren't sufficiently valued or effective.

"Companies that don't pay attention are going to pay a huge price. They just don't see it," says DeLong, who admits that a lot of the costs of knowledge loss are hidden. (He is currently researching ways to assess real costs.)

The knowledge retention strategy is a four-part construct. HR and WLP practitioners will be most involved in the first two:

- human resources processes and practices
- knowledge transfer practices
- knowledge recovery initiatives

Have a topic that you'd like to see covered in Trends? Email Rex Davenport at rdavenport@astd.org.

- IT applications to capture, store, and share knowledge.

In the HR area, paying attention to such issues as succession planning, phased retirements, building a retention culture, and reinventing recruiting processes all can contribute to a company's success at preventing—or at least reducing—lost knowledge.

In his later chapter on “early adopters,” DeLong tells the story of BP Trinidad & Tobago, which realized a need to develop and retain highly skilled local workers to meet its aggressive growth goals. In cooperation with Accenture, bpTT benchmarked best practices in recruiting, training, and retaining of geoscientists and developed a six-part HR strategy that includes a formal coaching program and skill development metrics.

To build a retention culture, DeLong says, “Organizations must pay attention to behaviors that support knowledge sharing. These initiatives won't be successful if retaining knowledge is a source of power.” An example of doing that well involves Delta Air Lines, which realized that much specialized knowledge would be lost as many employees accepted an early-retirement offer as part of a corporate downsizing. In an attempt to capture and retain that knowledge, Delta initiated a program of interviewing and debriefing departing employees on videotape; participants were later honored at a special awards luncheon.

Naturally, those types of efforts will only be successful when the employment separation is voluntary. However, to that DeLong says, “Knowledge is not taken into account often enough when managers are making layoff decisions.”

Under knowledge transfer practices, DeLong groups such initiatives as interviews and videotaping, documentation, training, storytelling, mentoring, and communities of practice. The type of initiative that is appropriate for knowledge transfer will depend on the type of knowledge being transferred: Is it implicit or explicit? Is it “rule based” or “know how”? DeLong defines those various categories and explains five principles to be considered when deciding on transfer tactics.

DeLong notes that many organiza-

tions, such as Quest International, a specialty flavors and fragrances business, have had great success with mentoring programs—if, he cautions, they exist within a “developmental [corporate] culture, one that values teaching.”

Training initiatives, however, that are built around transferring explicit knowledge that has been captured through documentation or interviews, can leverage the expertise of a few individuals to a much larger audience. “This not only increases the opportunities to leverage a particular expert's knowledge but it also makes it more likely that the knowledge will be retained by the organization in the long term,” he writes. “The limitation of training for knowledge transfer is that trainees can't question the original expert to test the veracity of the knowledge.”

The principles DeLong suggests to underpin knowledge-transfer training efforts—“training should balance current performance and future knowledge needs”; “be sure to use the most effective training format available, given knowledge being transferred”—will be second nature to most training professionals. More interesting is the chapter on transferring implicit and tacit knowledge, which explains how organizations can use such techniques as storytelling and after-action reviews, and gives multiple examples of programs in place at “early adopters.”

Given the demographic statistics DeLong cites (by 2013, the number of workers age 55 to 64 will grow by almost 40 percent), it seems inevitable that businesses and organizations worldwide will be struggling with the widespread retirement of senior workers—and the concomitant departure of those workers' knowledge. Human resource and workplace learning and performance professionals who think ahead about those issues and help their organizations shape an aggressive, proactive—rather than reactive—approach to retaining knowledge will surely have their own job security well assured.

Jennifer J. Salopek is a contributing editor to *T+D*; jsalopek@covad.net.