

Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know

By Nancy M. Dixon

In this issue of *T&D*, you'll learn many ways to keep the best and the brightest people in your organization. Knowledge management is the flip side of that coin. After all, you don't want to keep just the bodies; you also want to keep what they know. And if the worst happens and one of your superstars is poached, at least you'll have retained some of that employee's valuable know-how.

As Nancy M. Dixon writes in her new book, *Common Knowledge: How Companies Thrive by Sharing What They Know*, the advent of the knowledge-management concept four or five years ago was greeted by many companies with a rush to technology. Because *knowledge management* was as yet a fuzzy concept, many of us did the only thing we could think of: build a database. As Dixon explains, "Early users have found that unless the transfer system is an appropriate fit for the knowledge and task, it may end up being ignored and eventually abandoned."

Further, people are crucial to the success of your knowledge-management initiative, Dixon notes. She gently urges us to accept human nature: "If we want people in our organizations to share what they have learned, we would be wise to create the conditions in which sharing results is of personal benefit.... Little personal benefit comes from contributing to a database that's accessed by others with whom I have no connection and...from whom I am unlikely to hear. A database is like a black hole. It gives nothing back—no thank you, no smile, no sigh of relief, no enthusiasm on the other end of the line."

Oh, you may be saying. *So that's why no one contributes to the costly, unwieldy, and underused database we built a few years ago. Well, if that's not the answer, what is?* To help you answer that question, Dixon, a professor at The George Washington University, spent two years studying the knowledge-management systems at organizations such as Ford, Ernst & Young, the U.S. Army, Bechtel, and British Petroleum. Her first realization: That in order to determine the best



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type of system for your organization, you first must know these crucial facts:

- who the intended receiver of the knowledge is in terms of similarity of task and context
- the nature of the task in terms of how routine and frequent it is
- the type of knowledge being transferred.

Consideration of those three vital elements—combined with some understanding of whether the knowledge is tacit or explicit and how many functional groups will be using the knowledge—will lead you to one of these knowledge-transfer models that Dixon has defined and described:

Serial transfer. Used when a team does a task and then performs the task again in a different context. The group generating the knowledge and the group using the knowledge are the same group.

Near transfer. Used to transfer knowl-

edge between different teams doing similar tasks in similar locations but different contexts. The task involves routine work that a team performs repeatedly.

Far transfer. Appropriate when transferring tacit knowledge about a nonroutine task from one team to another. It's an effective way to leverage people who have specialized and critical knowledge.

Strategic transfer. Used when transferring complex knowledge between teams separated by time and space. Implementation of the transferred knowledge affects large parts of the system.

Expert transfer. Appropriate when transferring expert knowledge about a task that may be done infrequently. The problem doesn't have to be interpreted, only stated clearly. An example is sending a "Does anyone know how to...?" email to all staff in your department or company.

Dixon's prose is accessible, and her ideas are cogent and clear. The book is packed with case studies of real-world transfer systems at work. An organization seeking to create a knowledge-transfer system can easily use this book as a guide to determine the most appropriate model.

As useful as Dixon's five models are, what I find more compelling about the book is the attention she pays to the human aspect of developing and applying the models. Acknowledging human nature and realizing the need for people to benefit in order to participate in KM is one example of the issues Dixon highlights. Others are

Corporate culture: A chicken-and-egg conundrum. Dixon notes that many organizations believe that a "learning culture" must be created before a KM effort can be successful. Not true, says Dixon. "The...myth is that the exchange of knowledge happens only in organizations that have a noncompetitive or a collaborative culture. It follows that the first thing you have to do is fix the culture and then get people to share.

"But I've found that it's the other way around. If people begin sharing ideas about issues they see as really important, the sharing itself creates a learning culture."

A rose by any other name. What you call your knowledge-transfer system is as important as providing benefits to contributors. Or, rather, what you don't

call it is as important. The terms *lessons learned* and *best practices* can have unintended negative connotations. Dixon cites the Bechtel example: The company asked employees to send in “lessons learned.” Dixon writes: “After a few months of sparse response, the company realized that *lessons learned* meant *mistakes* to [its] construction employees. They felt they were being asked to reveal what had gone wrong and were reluctant to make themselves look bad.” *Best practices* can also hamper participation, as Ford Motor Company discovered, because employees worry that what they did wasn’t really “best” and are afraid to submit their contributions.

The importance of interaction. In her introduction, Dixon debunks the myth that technology can replace face-to-face contact and notes that “Technology has to be married with face-to-face interaction to create the most effective systems; one doesn’t replace the other, although clearly one can greatly enhance the other.”

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The changing nature of knowledge. In building a knowledge-transfer systems, it’s vital to remember that knowledge isn’t stable or static. Dixon invokes an interesting metaphor: “If the warehouse is a metaphor for the stable view of knowledge [a database], then a metaphor for the dynamic view of knowledge may be water flowing...; the water represents knowledge that’s continually in motion, always in play.”

Relinquish control. Dixon advises organizations to recognize that they can’t control an employee’s knowledge nor force him or her to share it. She notes that many companies have instituted incentives to get knowledge into their databases—to little avail. “The warehouse image has about it a feeling of control—the certainty of being able to grasp the knowledge of the or-

ganization and maybe even keep it from walking out the door.”

Further, Dixon emphasizes that a warehousing effort isn’t really the point: “Although incentives work to some extent, none delivers the hoped-for results. The answer lies not in better incentives but in altering the powerful originating image of the warehouse. That image places the focus on collecting and storing knowledge instead of reusing it, which is the ultimate goal.”

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