



Knowledge transfer: Pathways to a better future

As Baby Boomers increasingly look to move into retirement, what is best practice in terms of knowledge management? **Simon North** explains that it should and can be fun from the point of view of both the learner and those who are ‘giving’ the learning

The move to digitisation has seen an increasing dichotomy between virtual relationships and face-to-face relationships. This can be represented by the difference between, for example, traditional networking between people and LinkedIn via the internet.

Knowledge transfer moves between two ends of the spectrum. At one end you have digitised knowledge on a database, which is then mined as and when you require. You have to find ways of putting the data there, be it by scanning, converting books into a digitised form or digitising engineering drawings. What you’re doing is trapping as much data as possible in a digital form. Information in this format tends to be fairly dry and one-dimensional. Whilst a very efficient way of capturing data, this method is not necessarily the most effective when it comes to the transfer of data and of knowledge to third parties.

Human-to-human communication is much richer and more effective than basic digital information tends to be. Thinking about it from a learning-style viewpoint, someone might prefer to read and someone else may prefer to listen and ask questions. The digital knowledge base systems don’t suit everybody.

The definition of knowledge is about being

aware of, having information about and being able to distinguish. Translating that into the learning hierarchy, there are big differences between awareness, knowledge and skill. As the Chinese proverb says, “Tell me and I’ll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I’ll understand”. There’s a real depth of penetration around knowledge transfer. The more you think about it in those terms, the more you can see the opportunity there is to make knowledge transference fun.

Fun at work?

Knowledge transfer should and can be fun from the point of view of both the learner and those who are ‘giving’ the learning. This can be applied to both older people, who are typically the ones passing on knowledge and wisdom, and younger people, who are usually the learners. If you think about the current situation, there are effectively two tribes. There are those that have knowledge that needs to be transferred and there are those who need to learn it.

It is a prerequisite that those who transfer the information need to be respected – there needs to be a dignity for the older worker and a respect for the value that they have. The organisation has to do more than

purely stripping them of all the knowledge they have and leaving them feeling exposed and useless. The quality of the knowledge transfer has to be predicated on that level of respect for those who have the necessary knowledge.

What's the end game here? What result is the employer trying to achieve? The aim is that the company/organisation captures the ongoing appreciation of knowledge (as an asset) in its organisation and in its business as well as in internal issues like products and product development. But who is this process of knowledge transfer actually for? The primary beneficiaries are shareholders – which is fine as they're the ones who take the risk of investing capital in the venture. We're not saying that's a problem, it's just that we must be clear that this is a shareholder issue; it's about the quality of the business.

Knowledge transfer isn't, therefore, a one-off process; it's inherently part of the company's culture and ethos. It needs to be systemised within an organisation just like oxygen is systemised within an organism. It's about learning tomorrow from what you are today. It is absolutely critical that any business that wishes to be better tomorrow than today must learn to learn lessons. In writer and motivational speaker Daniel Pink's book *Drive*, being more masterful and better tomorrow than today is, in the author's view, a key determinant of what people who go to work do. People want to work in challenging environments, with challenging colleagues. Why? Because we want to be stretched and to learn – if we do the same old thing day-in-day-out, we become robotic and stale. We are not stimulated in any way and we don't move forward.

Passing the baton, with creativity

When someone dies, some people talk about it in terms of 'passing' – passing on, passing through or passing away. In that sense the transfer of knowledge is like passing a baton from one runner to another. Think of it in terms of giving someone a baton securely, so they can protect it as they run, before giving it to the next runner – just as the thousands of people who'll carry the Olympic flame in the build-up to London 2012 will need to do as they pass it around the world and then across Britain. In the context of a company, passing on knowledge is about the protection of the brand, the organisation, the team and also the individuals involved in it.

Businesses will want to establish processes of transferring knowledge that are fun. What they'll also

want to do is involve the older, experienced workers in co-creating that learning process and making it as experiential and practical as possible. The more that knowledge transfer can be made into something practical, the more likely it is to be fun and used.

Storytelling is becoming much more in vogue with regards to interesting learning. Older colleagues have a larger pool of stories, which is why stories tend to come from them; [they are] wiser people who have lived longer and had more experiences.

Take the Bhopal incident in India. In 1984 there was an explosion at the Union Carbide India Limited pesticide plant. It killed thousands of people immediately and to this day people are still dying from the poisonous gases that escaped from the plant. By 1987, the parent company Union Carbide Corporation was employing engineers to work from home for around three or four days a week, receiving graduate engineers who'd lay out drawings of the Bhopal plant. The older engineer would tell his group of graduates that it'll never happen again. He'd go through with them why it happened, what caused it and why it'll never happen again. As part of the generation that made a mistake that led to multiple deaths, the older engineers were transferring the knowledge and the lessons learned to the younger ones.

For an employer, overseeing the passage of workers through to an end point of their career, followed by a precipitous drop into their retirement is quite an old fashioned model in the 21st century. As time goes on, this will be merely an option for workers, as opposed to the mandatory business model it used to be. How does the older worker stay plugged in? How do they continue to contribute to the area of knowledge transfer when their main full-time role within the organisation comes to an end? They might not want to keep working full-time but may still be interested enough to want to be involved in the company's learning processes. They could continue to contribute as a mentor or they might want to be coached so that they can be a coach. Mentoring is more based on drawing from experience, whilst coaching is a safe environment where the individual works it out for themselves. **HC**

About the author

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