

Retaining Organizational Knowledge

With the onset of baby boomer retirements looming over most businesses in California and the U.S., many organizations face the potential loss of the “brain trust” that these experienced employees possess. In speaking with organizational leaders over the past five years, I hear their concerns about losing employees who have developed organizational processes and have the knowledge necessary to keep the organization competitive in today’s global market.

I have also heard many long-time employees mention that as soon as their 401k bounces back, they are planning on retiring. In other words, they are ready to retire but are just waiting for the economy to turn around to exit the workforce.

According to the *Employment Planning for an Aging Workforce: AARP California Survey of Employers (May 2007)*, “Virtually all organizations face a loss of institutional and expert knowledge with the departure of retiring or departing employees that can often cost them the competitive edge they need to remain successful in the marketplace.”

Out of the 514 employers surveyed across the state of California (all with at least 50 full-time employees), almost three-quarters of respondents believed that their business was extremely (12 percent), very (29 percent), or somewhat (32 percent) likely to face a shortage of qualified workers within the next five years. Two-thirds reported hiring younger employees as a way to safeguard the business from baby boomers retiring.

In the article, *Investing in Training 50+ Workers: A Talent Management Strategy (AARP 2010)*, the author states:

“This national survey of workers age 50+ reveals that they exhibit considerable interest in work-related training and believe that training improves their productivity and career prospects. ... The findings from the study should dispel many of the doubts employers may still harbor about the value of making training investments in the 50+ workforce, as well as concerns about how mature workers view such training. If the study findings reveal a call to action, it is for organizations to more closely match their training investments to both enterprise strategy and employee needs to ensure that their organizations remain competitive in today’s challenging business environment.”

So, many California employers have a large percentage of the workforce who are over the age of 50. Furthermore, these experienced employees are interested in and capable of learning new skills. They also value the investment the company makes in offering them skill development opportunities. This presents a unique opportunity for solving the aforementioned problem of the organizational “transfer of knowledge” from the experienced employees to the younger, less experienced employees of today’s organizations.

Many business leaders agree that the organization experiences a major loss of knowledge when an employee retires or leaves the organization. In our current economy, many businesses cannot afford to lose this organizational knowledge and yet, many experienced employees are poised to retire within the next few years. So what's to be done?

One possible solution is to train the more experienced employees to become facilitators and trainers themselves, working to educate younger generations in areas including advanced technology, institutional wisdom and other related skills. This approach to capturing and exchanging valuable organizational knowledge can be done in a variety of topic areas including:

- Organizational history, culture and structure
- Business models
- Branding
- Customer service and sales
- Negotiation skills
- Client services information
- Organizational strategic pillars
- Future strategies

Some of the skill building topics to consider when creating a train-the-trainer program for subject matter experts include:

- Leaving a Legacy
- Adult learning methods
- Intergenerational differences
- Building powerful presentations
- Facilitation
- Creating curriculum
- Coaching skills
- Leveraging technology
- Mentoring

This may seem like a daunting task to organizational leaders who are already at their limit of productivity. That is why the Employee Training Institute (ETI) at College of the Canyons is designing just such a program. We know that many organizations are facing the challenge of capturing, recording, and transferring critical knowledge before their subject matter experts retire. Taking the approach of training these valuable workers in the skills necessary to train, coach and mentor newer employees in the core functions of the organization is a viable solution to this dilemma.

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