Five Tips to Reduce Knowledge Loss

Brian Frank
Metlife, Inc

In today's job market, organizations have come to realize the impact of knowledge Loss. More and more of their best employees leave every day. Even when new people and their knowledge are brought in, chances are that those new people will leave within four years[i]. Managers are left wondering how to get the most out of their staff before the employees leave. Several methods of reducing knowledge loss have been in practice for some time in the business world. A few of these methods are described below:

1. **Don't let your best people leave!** – This seems like an obvious answer to this problem, yet it is the one that is can be easily overlooked. The easiest way to reduce knowledge loss is to avoid losing it in the first place. By retaining the people that have the knowledge, organizations can eliminate this "Brain Drain". Though it is unrealistic to believe that employees will remain with an organization for their entire working life, there are ways to improve retention. Certainly compensation is a popular method, though it can be expensive and, ultimately, personally unfulfilling for the employee. Providing alternative career paths can be an attractive option, as some people do not aspire to positions of leadership or authority. Arthur Andersen Business Consulting, prior to its demise, offered increasing pay for their software developers that do not want to move on to greater responsibility, such as project management. Transitioning the employee to a new position is an excellent way to provide them with a new challenge while retaining the employee and their knowledge within the organization. MetLife, a large US-based financial services company, offers job rotation for department supervisors, allowing them to move between departments to enhance their skills and industry experience. Be sure to explore other work environment options, such as telecommuting on a part or full-time basis. Most importantly, ask your employees what they want and how they feel about their current position. It is much easier to offer a reward to a valuable employee than to compete in a bidding war for an employee that has already decided to leave. More information on employee retention can be found at http://www.hr.com.

2. **Mentoring and Coaching** – Mentoring and Coaching have become very popular methods of training and knowledge transfer in recent years. By matching new or inexperienced employees with more experienced senior personnel, the intangible, tacit knowledge of your industry or organization can be passed on effectively. It allows the newer employees to grow without learning the hard way and creates a bond between Mentor/Coach and Protégé. This is particularly useful for organizations with a large population of employees approaching retirement age, steep learning curves, or high turnover rates. Mentoring and coaching also allow the more experienced personnel to "give back" to the organization. Arthur Andersen Business Consulting matched new consultants with experienced consultants to serve as mentors. This relationship can continue on throughout their career. Some consultants choose to change mentors as they refine career path. The National Mentoring Partnership (http://www.mentoring.org) is an excellent resource for information on mentoring and coaching.

3. Sharing Best Practices – The sharing and use of Best Practices has become a staple of successful companies. The ability to use the tested and proven knowledge of other organizations has helped others make decisions and improvements with greater speed and reliability. Though Best Practices have come under fire recently, this is typically due to their misuse. It is important to remember that Best Practices are suggestions, not mandates. Organizations undertaking a Best Practice study or implementation should keep in mind that what was appropriate for one company may not be for their own. The goal is to begin sharing what works to generate new ideas and to benefit from the successes of others. The sharing of Best Practices can be formal or informal, using structured databases, company Intranets, and knowledge portals, or simply roundtable discussions among employees or organizations. Accenture, as well as the other large consulting firms, posts their Best Practices on the company Intranet along with case studies, Best Performer profiles and diagnostic tools. Many books and articles have been written on the subject of Best Practices. The Benchmarking Exchange by Benchnet (http://www.benchnet.com) provides a subscription-based resource on Best Practices and Benchmarking.

4. Sharing Lessons Learned – Similar to mentoring and coaching, sharing lessons learned allows organizations to tap the experiential knowledge of its members. Lessons learned are simply statements by individuals or teams, identifying knowledge gained. As opposed to Best Practices, they do not imply that these lessons have been tested or proven over time and across industries, they are merely opinions on cause and effect. Typically, Lessons Learned are shared in a larger group setting as opposed to one-on-one sessions between mentor and protégé. Lessons Learned should include successes and mistakes, as we often learn more from our failures. As with sharing Best Practices, lessons learned can be shared formally or informally. Arthur Andersen Business Consulting used their quarterly meetings as a forum to discuss lessons learned from recent and on-going projects. Project team members offer a brief synopsis of the project to provide context to the lessons and respond to questions from other consultants. The US Army (http://call.army.mil) and the US Department of Energy (http://tis.eh.doe.gov/ll) feature some examples of online Lessons Learned databases.

5. Documentation – This is likely to be the most tedious method of reducing knowledge loss. Often, we find ourselves wondering why a decision was made or how a conclusion was reached. Had we documented the context of the situation and reasons behind our thinking there would be no need to speculate. Remembering our own thoughts is difficult enough. Attempting to decipher or uncover the thinking of someone else is almost impossible. For this reason, documentation can be extremely helpful. Tracking and maintaining the information used in decision making can help the organization retain the knowledge of the decision-maker. Unfortunately, it easy to neglect documentation due to deadlines and time constraints. When compared to the time it takes to rediscover knowledge the amount of time it takes to document a situation becomes insignificant. The software development group at Arthur Andersen Business Consulting utilized this technique often when writing complex code. The function and purpose of the code is written as a notation inside the code itself, but hidden to the users of the software, to assist other developers when the software must be maintained, updated, or enhanced. It is important to note, though, that the maintenance of documentation can be an expensive task, depending on the nature of your business. A June 2002 study by Jupiter Media Metrix (http://www.jmm.com) found that some organizations spent $25,000 for each non-technical employee every year on content management. Documentation may need to be updated and reviewed frequently in a dynamic and fast-paced environment with multiple authors. Content Managers, or a content management center, can be used by organizations to take on this responsibility and see to it that the documentation, and the knowledge it contains, is accurate, up to date, and available. A great deal of information is

available online regarding content management and various software packages that facilitate content management.

Before addressing your organization's knowledge loss, remember that every situation and organization is different. Research the problem before selecting an approach. Once the problem is understood, select the method that addresses the problem. And, most importantly, monitor your strategy over time to ensure that it has worked. Do not be discouraged if your initial attempt at reducing knowledge loss fails. Simply, start the process over again. Organizations are dynamic entities and cannot be treated with static solutions.

Additional articles on these topics and more can be found on the Harvard Business Review web site at http://www.hbsp.harvard.edu.

---

[i] Burke, John. Men are most likely to leave a job opening. [Online] Available http://www.bankrate.com/cweb/news/biz/thumb/20010404a.asp, April 4, 2001.