

Managing the brain drain

by Betty Healey, MEd

Retaining organizational wisdom from retiring workers

WITHIN THE NEXT five years, 25 percent of our current public sector workforce will be eligible for retirement. As public sector workers retire, important skills, organizational knowledge and corporate wisdom walk out the door with them.

The loss of knowledge, whether due to retirement or downsizing, can be one of the costliest problems confronting organizations today, a problem which is also largely ignored.

Typically companies are not aware of the risk of lost knowledge until the damage is done. There are a number of significant consequences of knowledge loss. These include compromised growth strategies, reduced efficiency, costly errors (which may or may not endanger the public), and decreased innovation.

It is clear that the Canadian public sector needs to respond to the threat of knowledge loss. There are three major initiatives that departments should consider if they are to effectively respond to upcoming retirement boom:

1. Perform an analysis of timing and prepare a schedule of your department's proposed retirements. This should include which employee is retiring when, what knowledge risks are being lost with that employee's departure, and a succession plan to capture critical knowledge that would otherwise be lost.
2. Know what type of knowledge is being lost with every employee about to retire. Does the employee hold explicit knowledge about the job, knowledge that is rule or procedure based and easily documented, or does he hold tacit knowledge, the kind of knowledge that is based on experience, tenure and being wise to the ways of the organization. Tacit knowledge is

difficult to capture in any concrete way and represents the organizational wisdom that may be lost.

3. Examine the topography of the retirements, that is, are retirements going to effect the entire department or are they localized to specific teams within the department. Knowing the width and breadth of the knowledge loss across the department will affect the department's strategy.

The effect of knowledge loss is rarely appreciated prior to the departure of the retir-

ing employee. It is clear however, that senior executives, middle managers and procurement officers have responsibility for identifying those departing employees who have knowledge that is unique and crucial to the functioning of their department and teams. This type of change can be overwhelming for most managers, but there are a number of practical solutions for successfully managing the "wisdom drain" essential to the long term health and success of the department.

Some solutions

The initiation of an organizational mentoring program, partnering retiring employees with younger staff members, is clearly one solution for containing the loss of organizational wisdom. Other programs such as "retirees on call" and phased retirement systems can also bridge the gap. These are however merely quick fixes to a problem that will effect the entire life cycle of your department.

Develop a knowledge-sharing culture

If hoarding knowledge has become common practice in your department, it needs to be addressed. Your access to all knowledge is key to the long-term success of your department or team. Knowledge exchange happens only when a culture of mutual respect and trust exist. Building this requires the following:

- a clearly articulated team mission developed and shared by all team members;
- stated team values and team norms or code of conduct;
- regular team meetings;
- annual events that build team spirit and facilitate the growth of respect and trust;
- regular project follow-up, debriefs and discussion of best practices;
- celebration of departmental/team successes;
- storytelling;
- regular coaching for the team and individual team members; and
- a performance feedback and development system.



The Accenture Institute for Strategic Change, which conducts research focused on strategic business issues, suggests that there are seven critical factors for successful knowledge retention in an organization. These are:

1. Identifying the knowledge at risk – understanding where your department is most at risk, which retiring employees hold critical knowledge.
2. Career development and succession planning – a departmental career development program that builds the knowledge that your staff needs to prepare for future roles and expertise. What does your department anticipate as your long term human capital needs?
3. Knowledge transfer practices – knowledge retention is intimately linked to how knowledge within your department is transferred. Practices such as after action or project reviews, communities of practice, mentoring programs, storytelling, departure interviews, ongoing training and professional development are key.
4. Using information technology – IT is an important tool for capturing, sharing and reusing information within your department. Establish standards and develop a system for recording key events, project evaluations and lessons learned, key contacts, and so on.
5. Phased retirements – entice those who are nearing their retirement to phase themselves out of the organization gradually, using this time to mentor and train those who will be replacing them.
6. Retirees on call - initiate a program for contracting retirees as consultants or departmental mentors after their retirement date.
7. Build a retention culture – make the capture, sharing and reuse of knowledge an everyday practice. This means assessing the current values and norms of your organization to determine what if anything undermines your goal of knowledge retention.

The retention of knowledge and wisdom in your department is clearly related to your future success, both in terms of managing departmental activity as well as serving the department's customers. The loss of wisdom is too frequently recognized only after the departure of the retired worker. The sheer numbers of retirements currently faced by the Canadian public sector highlights the urgent need to plan proactively

for the transfer of knowledge and wisdom within your department. *MM*

Betty Healey is a speaker, facilitator and author. Her latest book, roadSIGNS2: Travel Tips to Higher Ground (Creative Bound International Inc., 2006) is a compilation of practical thoughts on how individuals can find greater meaning in their lives by paying attention to and reflecting on the everyday "signs" around them. For information, call 800-287-8610 www.creativebound.com or email resources@creativebound.com.

The new face of mentoring

In light of the large number of public sector workers scheduled to retire in the next five years, mentoring takes on new meaning. Rather than the traditional mentoring role of helping younger professionals negotiate the waters of their department, the new face of mentoring includes the transfer of knowledge and wisdom.

For optimum success, your mentoring program will need to be founded on:

- mutual trust between the mentor and protégé, developed as a result of mutual respect;
- a commitment to personal growth and self discovery, through both support and challenge;
- an openness to giving and receiving feedback and assistance with projects; and
- a commitment to forwarding the action and attaining results.

When the principles of effective mentoring are followed, you can expect those who are mentored to learn, grow, and build the ability to:

- be more informed regarding departmental policy, procedure and culture;
- have more confidence in their decision making abilities as well as take personal ownership for their decisions and subsequent actions;
- develop the ability to critically examine and select the best course of action;
- stay focused when faced with change or transition; and
- be more committed to the department and the team within which they work.

To set up your mentoring program you will want to consider the following:

- Match mentors with protégés in advance of the scheduled retirement, allowing enough time for the transfer of knowledge, no-how and wisdom.
- Consider having the mentoring continue post-retirement.
- Offer an effective mentoring and coaching program for mentors.