

Effective knowledge management is so important to businesses...

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Dr Martyn Polkinghorne MInstKT argues that loss of staff may mean loss of essential knowledge and asks: are you at risk?

An unfortunate consequence of the recent economic climate is that staff turnover has been high in many sectors, with organisations shedding staff to maintain a necessary balance between income and costs.

Will these organisations have taken into account that the loss of staff often also means the loss of key knowledge? Can these organisations then survive without knowledge that may be pivotal to the success of their entire business model?

Senior executives need to be aware of the knowledge risks to their organisation so that they can implement strategies to minimise the potentially damaging effects to their business of losing knowledge.

As a starting point, an organisation needs to grasp the difference between the two types of knowledge. Explicit knowledge represents hard knowledge such as data, rules, processes and systems, whereas tacit knowledge concerns the softer more practical experience, know-how and know-who. An organisation needs both types of knowledge as one without the other is often ineffective.

Organisations should seek to identify the knowledge that is most critical to their business operations. Personal knowledge is the knowledge held by staff within an organisation. Deep smarts is a highly focussed form of personal knowledge based upon years of experience and held by only a few experts.

When staff leave a business, then so does their knowledge (both personal and deep smarts). In contrast, organisational knowledge is the knowledge that resides within and remains intact throughout staff changes. If knowledge is business critical then it's essential to ensure that it's held as organisational knowledge.

Knowledge can be found in different places within an organisation so it's essential to know where your important knowledge is stored so that it can be found and used when required, otherwise one key person leaving the organisation may render that knowledge inaccessible.

For a typical organisation there are 5 main storage areas for organisational knowledge that should be considered:

- Culture summarises the history and values of an organisation.
- Structures encode behaviour and define job roles.

- Processes and standard operating procedures embody knowledge.
- Physical settings of an organisation shape behaviour.
- Archives and data storage retain records of both activities, and possible solutions.

Once an organisation has identified where any critical organisational knowledge is located, the process needs to commence to manage that knowledge to safeguard it and to exploit it for maximum benefit.

A problem shared is a problem halved, and when it comes to knowledge, the managed sharing of knowledge reduces the risk of potential knowledge loss. Job sharing, shadowing, mentoring and cross functional groups of mixed discipline staff are all good strategies to ensure that a blend of both explicit and tacit knowledge are distributed and retained safely within an organisation.

It's not just about ensuring that staff are aware of "what is done", but they also need to understand "how it's done", "why it's done" and to have personal experience of "doing it themselves".

Some organisations are much more robust in terms of knowledge management because many of these knowledge sharing strategies are used on a regular basis as part of their internal 'business partnering' and staff development activities. Are you at risk? How robust is the knowledge management within your own organisation?



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