Chapter 24
The Role of Human Resources (HR) in Tacit Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

In Knowledge Continuity Management (KCM), knowledge from highly experienced employees leaving the organization is particularly challenging to document, classify and organize so that it can be accessed, understood and used by the successor to that employee. Horizontal knowledge sharing (in the context of peer-to-peer networks) and vertical knowledge transfer (in the context of KCM) are distinguished in order to address some of the conceptual confusion in this field. Both Human Resources (HR) and Knowledge Management (KM) units contribute to KCM but they need to do so in a more integrated fashion. The complementary roles played by the KM and HR teams are analyzed in a case study to show how they can work in tandem to ensure knowledge continuity in an organization. Key recommendations are made on how to implement a comprehensive KCM strategy for tacit knowledge, including the role that can be played by information and communication technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Tacit knowledge, knowledge that is difficult to articulate, is very challenging to share in general. This is difficult for a number of reasons such as complexity and context-specificity. Unfortunately, tacit knowledge has a great deal of value. Tacit knowledge is useful for succession planning, when knowledge needs to be shared by employees leaving the company with those who will remain. This is even more challenging because there is typically very little time to share. Knowledge management (KM) has typically been responsible for knowledge sharing and Human resources (HR) has typically been responsible for succession planning. Both need to work together more, and leverage appropriate technologies, in order to ensure that valuable knowledge is not lost to the organization.

Rothwell (2010) identifies a number of key drivers that have changed the HR and succession planning landscape which included:

- The 9/11 terrorist attack which highlighted the vulnerability of organizations in the face of a catastrophic disaster (often referred to as business continuity);
- An aging workforce which will continue to cause highly experienced employees to leave an organization, taking a lot of their hard-earned expertise with them;
- A growing awareness that while we can always try to find qualified employees to replace departing ones, there is much that is still lost – contextual and experiential knowledge that we refer to as tacit knowledge (often referred to as knowledge continuity).

To date, succession planning has been mostly the responsibility of the Human Resources department of an organization and has focused primarily on job positions. The first step is to identify critical positions or job functions that are "mission critical" or necessary for the organization to do what it needs to do. Traditional HR-based succession planning focuses very much on the individual level (Rothwell, 2010) and develops strategies such as training, development and retention strategies to ensure that the workforce has the necessary skill set in order for the organization to succeed.

Armstrong and Taylor (2014) define knowledge management (KM) as:

Knowledge management is concerned with storing and sharing the wisdom, understanding and expertise accumulated in an organization about its processes, techniques and operations (p. 173).

Knowledge continuity management (KCM) is a KM application focuses on what people know (and know how to do). Unless this type of valuable knowledge is somehow recognized and preserved in institutional memory (also called corporate or organizational memory), then it is effectively lost to the organization. Current and future employees will not be able to make use of this knowledge. They will have to rediscover and relearn the same content all over again. This results in inefficiency, ineffectiveness, poor performance and a much unnecessary rework. The focus of KCM is much more on the organization (Dalkir, 2011).

Today there is more and more knowledge required to carry out tasks. In parallel, the useful lifespan of this knowledge continues to decrease. We have to keep learning all the time because the organization changes, and the environment changes. The workplace has become a very dynamic place due to new technologies, new best practices, and new laws. In addition, employee mobility has increased and loyalty has decreased. Employees are much more likely to work for a number of different companies and even have multiple careers during the course of their working life. Traditional HR and even traditional management practices can no longer be effective in this ever-changing workplace. Knowledge continuity management has to become part of every manager's toolkit in order to ensure that the critically important knowledge assets of organizations are preserved (Rothwell, 2010).

Carmel et al. (2013) identified five types of critical knowledge assets that could be lost:

1. Subject matter expertise;
2. Knowledge about business relationships and social networks;
3. Organizational knowledge and institutional memory;
4. Knowledge of business systems, processes and value chains; and
5. Knowledge of governance.

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