

## Chapter 8.17

# Mentoring and the Transfer of Organizational Memory within the Context of an Aging Workforce: Cultural Implications for Competitive Advantage

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### ABSTRACT

Organizational memory, the knowledge gained from organizational experience, has significant potential for competitive advantage. Many authors in the knowledge management and human resource management literatures consider mentoring to be a particularly effective method of transferring organizational memory. In addition, older workers are often considered ideal mentors in organizations because of their experience and alleged willingness to pass on their knowledge to less experienced employees. There is an associated assumption that these workers also anticipate and experience positive outcomes when mentoring others. This

chapter considers whether these assumptions hold up in the workplaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly within Western countries. Individualistic cultural norms and some discriminatory practices towards older workers, along with a changing career contract that no longer guarantees employment in one organization for life, may discourage knowledge sharing in organizations. This chapter discusses the constraints and motivations that may operate when older experienced workers consider mentoring others. It considers relevant global and organizational cultural characteristics that may influence mentoring to transfer knowledge, and accordingly suggests strategies for those eager to capitalise on the knowledge experienced employees possess.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*“A survey of human resources directors by IBM last year concluded: “When the baby-boomer generation retires, many companies will find out too late that a career’s worth of experience has walked out the door, leaving insufficient talent to fill the void...”*

*Special Report: The Ageing Workforce, Economist, February 18<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>, 2006 (p.61)*

In many countries, people are retiring earlier than ever before and the retirement of the baby boom generation (born 1946-1964) over the next two decades signals a decline in the working populations of many developed countries. Accompanying this trend is the potential loss of organizational memory, and the subsequent loss of competitive advantage. When employees retire from an organization, it may be straightforward to replace their job-related knowledge, skills and abilities; but it is much more difficult to replace the organization and industry related knowledge gained from experience.

The aging workforce phenomenon has generated a number of publications in the human resource management literature. These are aimed at helping organizations encourage older employees to work for as long as possible, together with suggestions on how to effectively harness the knowledge, skills and abilities of the older worker (e.g. Critchley, 2004; DeLong, 2004; Hankin, 2005; Hedge, Borman & Lammlein, 2006; Lahaie, 2005). Some specifically address the threatened knowledge management crisis that may accompany the loss of experienced workers (e.g. DeLong, 2004). These writers also tend to consider mentoring in organizations as a way of both ensuring vital knowledge transfer while also accomplishing the continued engagement of older workers who will feel valued for their expertise and knowledge. It is seemingly a win-win approach for all concerned.

Underlying this perspective are several assumptions:

1. The ability to create, identify, capture and transfer organizational memory equates to competitive advantage for companies.
2. Older workers have valued knowledge and experience, and are significant repositories of organizational memory.
3. Older workers are particularly amenable to passing on their knowledge to others in the organization.
4. Older workers anticipate, and are more likely to experience, positive outcomes from mentoring others.

The knowledge management literature has given substantial focus to the contribution that the creation, identification, capture and transference of knowledge makes to an organization’s competitive advantage (e.g. Cross & Baird, 2000; Kransdorff & Williams, 2000; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Stein, 1995; Zack, 1999). However, as Argote and Ingram (2000) point out, “more effort has gone into identifying knowledge as the basis for competitive advantage than into explaining how organizations can develop, retain, and transfer that knowledge”(p.156). This may be one reason why the above assumptions have escaped closer examination.

The purpose of this chapter is to critically examine these assumptions, and discuss if they are still relevant for the workplaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Workplace cultures have changed considerably. The massive organizational downsizing and restructurings of the late 1980s and 1990s have affected the psychological contract between employee and employer. In particular, organizations can seldom guarantee life-long employment for workers and this may negatively influence the loyalty and commitment that experienced employees have for their organization (Barth, McNaught & Rizzi, 1993).

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