

Knowledge Walks Out the Door

By Michael Laff

For many organizations, the only planning being contemplated for retiring baby boomers is determining how many pizzas to order for the farewell party.

A surprisingly low 4 percent of organizations reported having a formal knowledge-transfer process, according to a survey of 2,046 senior human resources and training executives conducted by Novations Group, a Boston-based consultancy. Another 23 percent reported having an informal process.

“A lot of organizations don’t view their work as having to be passed down,” says Tim Vigue, a Novations consultant. “They don’t think they have any intellectual property to manage. We think that’s short-sighted.”

The concept of knowledge transfer is still new in the learning field, and Vigue believes its novelty is a primary reason why there are few best practices on how to do it effectively.

Much like succession planning, an organized knowledge-transfer plan requires long-range thinking, which is in short supply within most organizations that are consumed with quarterly forecasts and annual performance rankings.

“They’re either not worried about it or they’re too busy and think they can just hire someone from the outside and not lose too much,” he says. “If you don’t analyze it, you don’t know, and that’s the risk some people are taking.”

Vigue noted some conflicting reactions among managers who are reluctant to invest any longer in

development of soon-to-be-retired staff yet want to pursue them for their knowledge. Economic circumstances are requiring many older employees to work longer than they initially planned, so they might not be so eager to retire.

“Managers are saying, ‘Why should we develop them when they’re ready to

“Why should we develop them when they’re ready to go out the door?”

go out the door?’ There is some resentment among older workers because they believe they don’t get the same opportunities as younger employees,” Vigue says. “At the same time, other

organizations now see them as valuable.”

Capturing the knowledge of a long-time employee can save time when training a new hire because the frequently asked questions can be placed within training materials or in a wiki. Long-time employees may also possess valuable information about clients or partners that would be difficult for a new hire to learn initially.

Some clients have just begun asking how to establish a formal knowledge-transfer process. Government agencies were among the first institutions to take note of the large number of pending retirees. Vigue says his clients, notably in the oil and gas sector—where long-tenured employees are planning retirement—are beginning to analyze what information needs to be passed on.

Michael Laff is senior associate editor for T+D; mlaff@astd.org.

The BIG Number

44%

of organizations have no knowledge-transfer process in place and no plans to create one.

>>Has your organization created a way of transferring knowledge from retiring baby boomers to other employees?



Yes, a formal process	4%
Yes, an informal process	23%
No, but we plan to	29%
No, and we have no plans to	44%

Source: Novations Group



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