

Mind the Knowledge Gap

American business is facing the near-term loss of many of its more senior leaders through, in many cases, self-selected retirement. Senior leadership exiting leaves a business savvy gap that is hard to close. What can talent leaders do to retain older workers' knowledge before they leave? Share your responses for a chance to be featured in the October issue of Talent Management magazine.

Kim's Response

Generally, this isn't something that can be adequately remedied at the last minute. It's important to start early, years in advance, to differentiate and develop those with functional/technical expertise so they contribute to creating long-term organizational memory of mission-critical knowledge. Recommendations:

- Differentiate your experts. Expertise is rare by definition, but not all expertise is of equal value. That which drives your firm's unique value proposition is mission-critical and demands your focus. The good news is that you probably don't have to try to capture the knowledge of all your senior people. It's probably a small percentage of employees who have acquired a high degree of tacit mission-critical expertise. Focus on specialists, deep experts, not generalists.
- Initiate ongoing efforts to develop your functional/technical experts so they are capable of accelerating the acquisition and representation of expertise (neuroscience research has many implications – I'll address a few of them below). Primarily, your deep experts need to practice explicating and giving narrative to the patterns they have learned through experience. Expertise is often transparent to the expert – they don't know what they know, and this is a major hurdle. When experts practice explaining and giving narrative (addressing time, space, and context) to what they know, their tacit expertise becomes, over time, explicit.
- Leverage the point above by developing your deep experts to become mentors and coaches. This is easier than it sounds because in addition to learning coaching skills, most experts need to change their mindset. Expertise is rare by definition, and our value to our organizations is largely determined by our expertise. It follows, then, that experts typically see an inherent threat in a request for them to share their expertise. They need to learn to embrace recognition for sharing expertise and stop seeing it as a threat. When this occurs, your deep experts will begin to feel a sense of personal responsibility and ownership of the "organizational intelligence" in their domain of expertise.
- Leverage the findings of neuroscience to accelerate the acquisition of expertise. Having expertise means having a relatively large collection of patterns within a knowledge domain. You asked the question: "What can talent leaders do to retain older workers' knowledge before they leave?" Another way of saying this is: What can talent leaders do to help others acquire the patterns learned through experience and make accurate predictions based on those patterns? You could say that intelligence is 1) the ability to recognize patterns (in the brain, they are groups of neurons that fire together; some neuroscientists refer to them as invariant representations, but you can think of them as models, stereotypes, etc.) and 2) to make accurate inferences/predictions based on those patterns; by the way, stereotyping (profiling, if you will) is something driven by evolutionary biology and necessary for our survival; the trick is to avoid creating false stereotypes.

- Your deep experts have many more accurate patterns stored in their brain and they have more effective (faster) connections between patterns because of rehearsal and focused practice. Practice increases the myelin sheath connecting neurons associated with various patterns, and that means that signals travel much more quickly – important for retrieval and also creating/testing of new patterns. If you develop ways to provide guided and focused practice for those learning from your deep experts, they will a) have more and richer patterns that lead to more accurate inferences, b) make more timely decisions because they can access those patterns more quickly, and c) do a better job of creating and validating new patterns which is how expertise grows. You can say that learning is largely the creation and testing of patterns.