Knowledge management solutions for the leaving expert issue

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Abstract

Purpose – The leaving expert (LX) is often regarded only as an issue for the retention of his or her knowledge for the business or organization. The purpose of this paper is to show that a more comprehensive knowledge perspective reveals various issues and leads to different knowledge management (KM) remedies.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper approaches the topic from an instruments or process aspect as well as from a case study view. One of the remedies is described in depth based on considerable application experience: the Leaving Expert Debriefing, a planning and knowledge transfer process. The general approach of prophylaxis and/or bridgeover by excellent KM is also taken into consideration with an overview on useful KM detail processes or instruments.

Findings – The Leaving Expert Debriefing process based on a comprehensive perspective of knowledge has proven to be a useful planning and knowledge transfer instrument, especially when applied early enough. On the other hand, continuously furthered good KM solutions and processes considerably reduce risks in LX issues.

Practical implications – The paper offers many details, for the most part based on practical experience on how to successfully apply the Leaving Expert Debriefing process and what else KM can also contribute.

Originality/value – The Leaving Expert Debriefing process is described in detail showing that various knowledge transfer and development actions for the different forms of knowledge have to be defined and focused on strategically business-critical knowledge areas. It is positioned as one of many KM remedies for the LX issue. Two quite different real-life LX cases and KM applications for them are described: the LX as a knowledge vault versus a node in a knowledge network.

Keywords Knowledge management, Knowledge transfer, Knowledge mapping, Human resource strategies

Paper type Technical

Introduction – the leaving expert: only a knowledge retention issue?

There are various situations surrounding the departure of an expert from an organization, e.g. moving to another part of the company, starting up his own business, taking on a position with another organisation, as well as retiring. Each case means a specific relationship between expert and organization, while he/she is leaving and after departure. This necessitates different approaches for knowledge sharing or, as some people calls it, knowledge retention. A closer look at the various forms of knowledge with which the leaving expert (LX) is involved shows that the LX issue means more than just an issue for knowledge retention and thus mainly for human resource management. (See also Slagter, 2007, which looked more closely into the implications of KM for the aging workforce with respect to the HR manager. But nevertheless in some cases it may be worth the effort to retain the expert himself).

A comprehensive knowledge perspective leads to various issues

Knowledge of an organization can be segmented into different topics or knowledge areas. The knowledge in any area is distributed across three classes of knowledge carriers and accordingly three forms of knowledge:
1. individuals with their individual competencies;
2. groups or organizational units with distributed networked knowledge fitting together like puzzle pieces of complementary competencies with some collective common knowledge acting as the “adhesive” between the pieces; and
3. information displaying described and more or less codified, i.e. defined and structured knowledge.

From this comprehensive knowledge perspective the basic question with the LX issue turns into “the expert is leaving, what happens to the organization's knowledge?” with the following aspects:

- experts often possess exclusive individual knowledge which constitutes an issue for replacement or collaboration with the LX after departure;
- in the distributed networked knowledge of a group, team or community the expert may be the exclusive owner of puzzle pieces which can be an issue for replacement, but may also be an issue for a workaround or reconstruction by the owning group without the LX;
- the distributed collective knowledge as well as described codified knowledge is not exclusive and the issue is to locate it, get access to it as well as set links to related knowledge for the future without the LX; and
- quite another question has to be considered, too: is reactive replacement of knowledge the only right approach or is there not the chance to pro-actively re-align the organization's knowledge with changing business objectives, i.e. learn and innovate in new directions besides the LX's exclusive knowledge or at least parts of it?

Organization of this paper

In this paper two real-life LX examples are discussed which show quite contrary LX situations. The major KM solution of this paper, the Leaving Expert Debriefing process, is then described in detail accompanied by a number of recommendations. A wide spectrum of additional KM remedies aimed more at prophylaxis is detailed. Finally the results in the LX example cases are reported, followed by some conclusions.

Example cases

1. The LX as a knowledge vault. In a small or medium-sized enterprise the expert for the core product, highly specialized lacquers, is going to retire. The analysis of his expertise shows that in the most business- and product-critical knowledge area about chemical design and production of application-specific lacquers the LX has unique, in-depth exclusive competencies. There is no internal or external knowledge network about this expertise and even worse: there is no other source as, e.g. university or company research laboratories known to work on it. Concerning codified knowledge there are almost no product or process models, only some personal notes by the LX (difficult for anyone else to understand). Furthermore, up to now the company has avoided publishing anything substantial about their core product – not even any descriptions for claiming intellectual property rights – to prevent competitors from infiltrating their business.

2. The LX as a node in a knowledge network. In a large corporation an in-house male consultant and corporate process executive responsible for standardized processes in the management of intellectual capital (ideas, knowledge, patents, brands and standards) is
going to move into his own consulting business, but still retaining good relations with the corporation. During the last two years he has been working a lot with teams from related communities of practice to define process models for standardization. The results have been discussed with the communities and jointly codified with many details and descriptions in the corporate business process system. Several documents with varying degrees of detail and various levels of proficiency in the related management disciplines have been created and distributed and discussed with the community members.

**KM solutions (1): the Leaving Expert Debriefing process to further necessary knowledge transfer actions**

A basic operative reaction to any LX issue is a proven planning and knowledge transfer process called Leaving Expert Debriefing (see the following process model). It has been applied in various LX situations by the author.

**Detailed actions in the LXD process steps**

The following action list describes the steps in Figure 1 in more detail:

1. LXD Workshop Preparation (1) – by the moderator and the Leaving Expert (LX):
   - Understand the LX’s situation, motivation and future plans.
   - Explain the LXD process and expected contributions by the LX;
   - Create the knowledge area list, e.g. based on the knowledge area layer model (see Figure 2).
   - Estimate the knowledge portfolio (see example Figure 3).
   - Plan the LXD workshop and its participants.

2. LXD Workshop Preparation (2) – by the moderator and the LX’s manager plus eventually the successor(s):
   - Understand the LX’s situation, motivation and future plans.
   - Discuss and eventually align the knowledge portfolio to future business needs.

**Figure 1 Process model for the Leaving Expert Debriefing (LXD)**

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Notes: LX = Leaving Expert; K. = Knowledge; ● = the role is responsible for this step;
○ = the role is contributing to this step
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Figure 2: Business-critical knowledge areas of the LX in a five-layer model – sample from example case (2)

Note: The general description of the layers can be seen on the right. The layers are arranged from top to bottom according to their “visibility” for the LX’s internal or external clients. Ellipses show major knowledge areas with a list of detail areas on the right.

Figure 3: Knowledge Portfolio for example case (2)

Note: LX’s knowledge areas are positioned according to business impact as a result of negotiations between LX, successor(s) and manager. Dashed line area: selected knowledge areas to focus on.
Define the model of future collaboration with the LX, e.g. an informal relationship for information and experience sharing from time-to-time or a consulting relationship on a fee basis.

Discuss if necessary an effective incentive for the tandem LX and successor in case of a successful execution of the knowledge transfer program (to be planned).

Invite if necessary appropriate other knowledge stakeholders (co-workers, customers, suppliers) to the LXD workshop.

Optionally involve higher management, e.g. get a special business message for the LXD workshop.

 Invite the LX to reflect upfront about Lessons Learned, which may be dedicated to any person or role in the organization.

3. LXD process, step 1 (in the LXD Workshop) – Identify and describe business-critical areas of proficiency and define transfer actions:

- Identify and focus on LX’s most business-critical and exclusive areas of proficiency, e.g. by discussing and selecting knowledge areas mainly in the right top quadrant of the knowledge portfolio (dashed line area in Figure 3) and focusing on detail areas from them (see Figure 2).

- Sketch a general view of the LX’s exclusive knowledge by appropriate knowledge maps and capture business stories related to elements of them (Krause, 2006). Such knowledge maps can be, e.g. models of business processes, production systems or product/service models strongly related to LX’s activities (see example in Figure 4).

- Discuss optional knowledge transfer actions, e.g. collaboration of successor and LX in appropriate tasks, projects, processes or team activities. Capture any decisions in the transfer action plan.

4. LXD process, step 2 (in the LXD Workshop) – Identify, describe and evaluate business-critical relationships and knowledge networks and define transfer actions:

- Map LX’s relationships with future impact, e.g. in a form of mindmap, see Figure 5.

Figure 4 A product model as a knowledge map leading to various sources of knowledge about the product (and more)
Add relevant information about the content of this relationship: what is it about and who is the partner? – optionally classified appropriately, e.g. practitioner, consultant, manager …

Add, optionally, information about value and positive and negative consequences of relationships. Before recording such organizationally critical information make clear who is the exclusive future owner and how does the distribution appear on this relationship map.

Optionally add prioritization.

Optionally capture background information: how has the relationship developed, and why?

5. LXD process, step 3 (in the LXD Workshop) – Identify and describe business-critical codified knowledge assets, e.g. documents, records and instruments, and define transfer actions:

- Discuss the list of possible items which the LX was pushing and which are still important in the future (see No. 3 in Figure 6).
- Secure access information and organize access transfer.
- Define future contribution, ownership and/or transfer actions and add to transfer action list (see example in Figure 6).
- Create a document space as a kind of “LX’s Heritage Archive”, where he/she can move any documented knowledge of any type, which may be useful in the future for the organization, but is not transferred at the moment.

6. LXD process, step 4 (in the LXD Workshop) – capture Lessons Learned and other advice and define transfer:

- Discuss, refine or enhance Lessons Learned from the LX and define how to transfer them to the addressees (see Figure 7).

7. LXD Process, step 5 (in or after the LXD Workshop) – consolidate, prioritize and plan transfer actions:

- Combine similar or concatenated transfer actions and create appropriate sequences.
- Complete transfer action planning with deliverables or success measures, due date and responsibilities, where necessary.
8. LXD process, After-workshop program – Execute transfer actions; verify and communicate results:

- At least discuss progress and final success (often not carried out) – even better, assess based on upfront negotiated success measures. For the final proof of success an interview with the successor(s) should be conducted based on the question: Can you do the job now?

**Institutionalizing the LXD process**

After successful introduction of some LXD processes – optionally institutionalize Leaving Expert Debriefing (this action should be treated separately from any specific LXD process as it is a basic KM task in an organization to implement new KM processes organizationally):

- announce LXD moderators and arrange training for them;
- codify LXD knowledge in a process model as in Figure 1, in record templates, learning material and a guideline for LXD moderators;
- integrate LXDs into organizational culture as a business rule.
integrate LXDs by inserting process interfaces or links into business processes which should trigger an LXD, e.g. the human resource management process or the project management process;

integrate LXDs into the internal audit system as a checkpoint;

eventually integrate LXDs into the knowledge planning and controlling processes, e.g. by the knowledge strategy process (Hofer-Alfeis, 2003); and

ensure that the LXD is part of your business process system as detail process of KM or intellectual capital management processes.

**General recommendations and trade-offs to be managed with LXDs**

- start the LXD early to have enough time for transfer actions versus do not start LXD without any successor;
- follow the LXD process strictly to keep quality and time constraints versus do not interrupt unexpected but probably important sidetracking in the course of the discussions;
- strive for an effective procedure and rich and useful LXD results versus care for the specific situation of the LX, e.g. by sensitive and trust-inspiring word and action (some wording can be really unpleasant in these situations, e.g. to reduce a person considered more of a loss to a "knowledge loss" effect); and
- care for any valuable experience of the LX versus keep business objectives, future directions and innovation needs in mind.

The LXD is a specific KM option to plan and react to LX-related knowledge issues. For comparable additional approaches (see also, Carter (2004), American Productivity and Quality Center (2002)). An adequate prophylaxis is – as in many other cases – another field of KM remedies and will be discussed in the next section.

**KM solutions for the LXD issue (2): prophylaxis and/or bridgeover by excellent KM**

In general excellent KM means that business-critical knowledge becomes better visible, appropriately distributed and networked, at the right level of proficiency and adequately codified. This can be achieved by a great variety of KM instruments or detail processes[1]. Some examples:

1. Strategic planning and controlling: the business-critical knowledge of an organization and related KM actions improving it should be planned and controlled by defining and executing a knowledge strategy (Hofer-Alfeis, 2003) or an intellectual capital management program based on intellectual capital reporting. (There are many books and papers on intellectual capital reporting. A guideline and documentation tool to define an intellectual capital management program based on an intellectual capital report (in German: *Wissensbilanz*) can be downloaded (in German only)[2]. In the knowledge strategy process there is a specific step to define knowledge objectives for the most business-critical knowledge areas. At this point a check to identify knowledge risks should be included and appropriate early KM actions as well as an LXD process can then be initiated.

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"The Leaving Expert Debriefing process has proven to be a useful planning and knowledge transfer instrument, especially when applied early enough."
2. Right-in-time or almost continuous knowledge transfer directly with respect to the LX issue:
   - tandem collaboration of LX and successor;
   - teams and especially those with mixed generation members;
   - job rotation and collaboration models with assistant, mentor sponsor or coach roles;
   - communities of practice or similar knowledge networks;
   - handbooks, guidelines and trainings; and
   - video and interview archives and appropriate search instruments.

3. Instruments with respect to general knowledge transfer (e.g. with LX and successors involved in them):
   - team briefing and team debriefing;
   - lessons learned and best practice sharing;
   - knowledge or expertise locator systems and procedures and adequate learning opportunities; and
   - modelling and communication systems and procedures for distributed and networked organizational knowledge, e.g. process or product modellers for strongly structured knowledge or wikis for weakly structured knowledge.

4. Approaches that support bridging the gap in the first months or years after the LX has left:
   - any opportunity to get, if necessary, advice at short notice, e.g. by sponsoring a mobile phone for the LX for contacting him/her in case of urgency;
   - any type of networking opportunity, e.g. open access to internal community discussions;
   - alumni networks, meetings and forums, e.g. offered in social software solutions like XING; and
   - any type of contractual collaboration and consulting.

Another very general direction of bridging over LX issues is enabling or enforcing all knowledge carriers (individuals and organization as well as information systems), to become more flexible and to drive or support innovation. Thus the organization can more easily overcome negative LX effects and take the opportunity to renew from it.

Results for the example cases and conclusions

What happened in the two LX case examples discussed in this paper?

In case (1), the LX for highly specialized lacquers in the small or medium-sized enterprise has finally retired and a smaller part of his valuable knowledge could not be transferred. He still maintains a good relationship with the company and occasionally is involved in urgent production issues on a consultant basis. But a very successful solution has been:

1. first, to plan rather early (one year before departure) how to transfer knowledge successfully and as a result to search carefully for an appropriate successor, i.e. a young chemistry graduate with a doctorate whose major characteristics should include open-mindedness and sociability accompanied by good networking experience;

2. second, the LX and his successor should become acquainted and start knowledge sharing in interesting joint projects and customer visits; and

3. third, support the successor in documenting and mapping product and process knowledge in appropriate ways.

In example case (2), the LX for intellectual capital management and its standardized processes, started his new career as a freelance consultant and in the meantime has carried
out some projects for his former corporation. The knowledge transfer was managed successfully by employing the following remedies/solutions:

- Two Leaving Expert Debriefings were run for each of the successors, as his work field had been distributed to two separate organizations. The LXD's were conducted according to the process discussed in this paper. In both cases the resulting action list for knowledge transfer comprised about eight to 12 explicit actions of LC and successor. In one of these LXD's a few in-house customers (members of the team he had been leading) joined and contributed very well by posing good questions from different aspects and initiating interesting discussions about the future of the field.

- A major part of joint process knowledge from the LX and the team had already been codified into the corporate modelling system for business processes, so that primarily only some sessions to train the successor in its usage and further development were necessary.

- Several documents with various levels of proficiency, e.g. a well-described file of basic concepts and approaches had already been successively created and needed only further development.

- The work and responsibilities with the larger expert networks (communities of practice) had been transferred by early introduction of the successors to the community and by sharing increasingly more responsibilities in a type of tandem team.

- A result of the teams' work has been very useful for the successors, too: a knowledge map showing the variety of intellectual capital management instruments or detail processes used throughout the corporation in relation to the steps in the standardized processes, where they could best be applied. The knowledge map additionally contained information about the instrument owner, his organization and links to documentation about it. Thus the basis for further good involvement of the right experts into the teams has been prepared.

- Another important perspective for older experts can be derived from that experience. The older LX could serve in his last years in an organization as a very effective and well-accepted moderator and connector, e.g. for cross-organizational communities of practice, for knowledge transfer between successive teams and as a kind of guide for emergent communities or business topics to grow carefully for future business needs, e.g. with an appropriate weblog. Thus great sense-making is achieved for both parties (organization and LX) in the rather fragile relationship of the last months or even years.

In conclusion: the Leaving Expert Debriefing process has proven to be a useful planning and knowledge transfer instrument, especially when applied early enough. On the other hand, continuously furthered effective KM solutions and processes considerably reduce risks in LX issues. Finally the successor has often good reasons and ideas behind moving on in more or less new directions, what is always more successful if an understanding of the previous knowledge situation with and without the LX has first been clarified.

Notes

1. A comprehensive collection of KM instruments or KM detail processes can be found in BITKOM Leitfaden WM-Prozess-Systematik, 2007 (in German), available at: www.bitkom.org/de/publikationen/3833745785.aspx
2. There are many books and papers on Intellectual Capital Reporting. A guideline and documentation tool to define an Intellectual Capital Management program based on an Intellectual Capital report (in German: Wissensbilanz) can be downloaded (only in German): available at: www.bmw.de/BMWi/Navigation/Technologie-und-Innovation/Wissensbilanz/wissensbilanz-toolbox,did=147188.html

References

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