Knowledge management among the older workforce

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to draw the attention to the necessity of knowledge management (KM) among the older workforce and to provide guidelines for human resource (HR) managers on how to engage in this process.

Design/methodology/approach – First, characteristics of older employees, viewpoints of HR managers on the older workforce and critical success factors of KM are explored through a literature review and conversations in the field. Thereafter these findings are combined in order to arrive at those aspects that an ideal organizational culture for KM must entail among the older workforce. When a more proactive management style is incorporated in this culture, KM among older employees will be significantly facilitated.

Findings – The paper finds that there exist opportunities for synergy between a proactive management style towards older employees and effective KM among this group. HR managers need to review their point of view towards the older worker in order to facilitate knowledge sharing.

Research limitations/implications – This article’s intention is to give general guidelines to HR managers on how they can facilitate KM among older workers. It is not extensively based on direct empirical findings; therefore further research is needed to verify, falsify, specify and complete the conclusions and recommendations made in this article.

Practical implications – This paper constitutes a real potential to develop a variety of new approaches in knowledge management, in particular towards older employees.

Originality/value – The paper brings together two topics, which have explicitly combined but received little attention from researchers. It provides HR management with practical suggestions on how to empower their older workforce and ensure knowledge sharing.

Keywords Older workers, Knowledge management, Critical success factors, Organizational culture

Paper type General review

Introduction

The world is never standing still. The world is quickly changing; internationalization increases, regulations change and customers demand flexibility, speed and quality. This makes it difficult for an organization to keep up with its environment, or even be competitive. Literature has devoted a lot of attention to these topics and new concepts made their entry, like total quality management, business process reengineering and learning organizations. It becomes more and more obvious that the optimal generation and application of knowledge is one of the most important keys to success. An organization needs to be flexible in order to keep up with their competitors and knowledge is needed to obtain that flexibility. Knowledge management is a discipline that recognizes the importance of knowledge and assists organizations in optimally using the knowledge that is present in the organization.

Another issue that is being extensively discussed in journals now a day is the ageing workforce; between 2005 and 2015 the so-called baby boomers are going to retire en masse. A well-planned and effective knowledge transfer between the different generations...
of the workforce is of great importance. Knowledge about the organization, the processes within the company, and much more critical organizational knowledge need to be transferred to the other generation of employees. If this does not happen then this knowledge will disappear and the knowledge level of many organizations will become unbalanced. Especially in knowledge intensive industries this can have disastrous consequences. Knowledge management is an activity that can help organizations to overcome these threats.

This article will bring these two topics together; the senior employee and knowledge management. First the two topics will be discussed separately in order to create clarity about their content and meaning. Secondly, the issues will be combined and aligned. Furthermore this article will provide a number of guidelines for human resource (HR) managers, which they can use as a starting point when coping with this problem.

Knowledge management: definition and processes

There exists a lot of discussion about what the proper definition of knowledge management is or should be. Scholars, practitioners, and others in field of business management are still debating about the concepts and definitions related to knowledge management (KM) and its definition is currently still evolving. To give an impression of what kind of concepts are used in the different definitions, below a few of them will be discussed. One definition of KM is one by Groff and Jones (2003):

Knowledge management is the tools, techniques, and strategies to retain, analyze, organize, improve, and share business expertise.

This definition places the emphasis on the KM processes that take place within an organization and especially the IT facilities that support these processes. This definition is more about managing explicit knowledge, by the use of IT. The human factor is not mentioned.

Another widely accepted definition is the following of Dr Yogesh Malhotra:

Knowledge management caters to the critical issues of organizational adaptation, survival, and competence in face of increasingly discontinuous environmental change … Essentially, it embodies organizational processes that seek synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity of information technologies, and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings (Dr Yogesh Malhotra).

This definition is more encapsulating the human factor that is needed to manage knowledge. This leads us to the following definition of Rastogi (2000), who really emphasizes the importance of the human factor in his definition. This definition focuses on the ability of individuals and groups to enable knowledge creation, use and sharing. The definition is:

Knowledge management as a systematic and integrative process of coordinating organization-wide activities of acquiring, creating, storing, sharing, diffusing, developing, and deploying knowledge by individuals and groups in pursuit of major organizational goals. It is the process through which organizations create and use their institutional and collective knowledge.

This article will use this definition of KM, since this definition recognizes the importance of the human factor in KM by focusing on the ability of individuals and groups to enable knowledge creation, use and sharing. This article will focus on KM among senior employees and places its emphasis on how KM can be optimized among this group of employees. The human factor is therefore very important to take into account.
Although there exist not yet agreement about what the definition of knowledge management should be, researchers agree that KM is an important activity for an organization to undertake.

But why is KM so important? To stay, or even become competitive it is extremely important for organizations to be flexible and to be able to adapt quickly. Knowledge is thereby an important factor.

Knowledge management focuses on ways of sharing, storing and maintaining knowledge, as a means of improving efficiency, speed, and competency of individuals within an organization, and therefore increasing the profitability, flexibility and adaptability.

Within literature a lot of different processes that form KM can be distinguished. However it is possible to bring these activities back to four processes in which the basic operations of KM are realized. In Figure 1 these processes are depicted.

This article is mostly concerned with the processes of guaranteeing existing knowledge and the distribution of knowledge, since these are the first two processes that come to the front when employees leave the organization (in case of this article the senior employee).

**The ageing workforce**

To be able to clarify why this article is focusing on knowledge management among the senior employee and why this is becoming so increasingly important it is necessary to take a look at the recent developments within the labor force and the characteristics of the senior employee.

The percentage of employees in the age group 50 to 60 increased significantly the last ten years. The increase of senior employees within organization has certain consequences for managers, and it also means that the upcoming years many of the senior employees will retire. Most organizations are not fully aware of the serious consequences that the loss of this large source of labor can have (Ekamper et al., 2001). Research has shown that individual managers do not seem to have a sense of urgency that they need to anticipate and act on this development (Ekamper et al., 2001). However, there is a need to act and anticipate since these employees have a great pool of knowledge at their disposal.

**Figure 1** The four basic processes of knowledge management

![Diagram](image-url)
After discussing these developments it is necessary to discuss how to define the senior employee exactly. This article will use the definition of employees within the age group 54-60 years. This because a lot of studies and research concerning the senior worker use the same definition and in this way it is easier to apply the knowledge gained in those researches to the problem discussed in this article.

The managers' perspective on the senior worker

There is of course no single “managers’ perspective” on senior workers, and it is important to emphasize that, in all different literature that exist about this issue, there is evidence of both positive and negative images of senior workers, and of good practice and bad. However there are some themes that often come to the fore, when discussing senior workers with managers. To illustrate this, the findings in this area within the 1990s and some current findings will be discussed.

Two studies performed in the 1990s (Institute for Manpower Studies, 1990; Lynn and Glover, 1998) of manager attitudes to senior workers suggested that managers associated certain characteristics with age. These are shown in Table I and can be seen in both a positive and negative way.

A recent study performed by Remery et al. (2001) found out that a lot of managers tend to associate an increase in the average age of their workforce with higher labor costs. Managers also tended to look upon senior staff as employees with a high level of absenteeism and a resistance to change. But managers also associate an older workforce with higher levels of experience and an increase in know-how.

These presumptions narrow the mindsets of managers; when they think mainly negatively about the senior employee, they will not initiate activities for these employees that demand flexibility, change, etc., since managers are convinced that this age group is incapable of living up to these demands. In this way the senior employee never gets a chance to “prove” him/herself.

It might be the case that managers bring all these presumptions to the fore to cover their true reason why they do not like to employ senior employees; the high costs. But when managers want to get rid of senior employees as soon as possible, because of the high costs, they tend to overlook one important thing; by firing the employee the knowledge gained by the employee over the years go with him/her.

From the information above we can conclude that the perspective that managers have on senior employees has not changed significantly over the years. But what is actually true about these presumptions? Different studies (McIntosh, 2000; Society for Human Resource Management, 1998) affirmed that, in general, senior workers:

- had low turnover rates;
- were flexible and open to change;
- possessed up-to-date skills;
- were interested in learning new tasks;
- had low absentee rates; and
- had few on-the-job accidents.

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<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Positive and negative characteristics of senior employees according to managers</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Negative characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility and maturity</td>
<td>Lack of flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment to work</td>
<td>Slow to adapt or resistance to change</td>
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<td>Experience</td>
<td>Outdated skills, particularly in relation to new technology</td>
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<td>“Staying put” in a job</td>
<td>Lack of mobility</td>
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<td>Difficult to retrain</td>
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<td>Prone to ill-health</td>
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The only area where professionals expressed their concern was the area of senior employees and new technology (McIntosh, 2000).

It is interesting to see the contradictions that exist. But how do we find out what is true? This issue will be addressed under “recommendations”.

**Characteristics of the senior employee**

Senior employees have other characteristics than younger employees. This part of the article will discuss the most important differences.

**Motivation and job satisfaction**

There are a lot of theories about what motivates employees. One of the earliest ones was Maslow’s (1954) theory. He explains a certain hierarchy of human needs; five levels of needs that can be visualized in a pyramid (see Figure 2)

In order to motivate employees a manager needs to satisfy their needs. The satisfaction of these needs can be realized by:

- money (material needs; level 1 and 2);
- a say in things and involvement (level 3 and 4); and
- a certain degree of autonomy or independence (level 5).

As a human being grows to maturity, the need for experiencing respect increases, implying both respect for others and self-respect. The same is true for the needs for self-actualization. Both needs function as a motivator for the senior worker (Keuning, 1998).

Also, as employees grow older, interesting work becomes more of a motivator. A report by Heymann and Terlien shows that senior employees want work that has a meaning; they want to feel useful on the work floor. These researchers also emphasize that respect and recognition are highly valued by senior employees. Managers should keep these changes among adulthood in mind, to be able to employ their employees as efficient and effective as possible through all stages of life. Research performed by Diekstra (2003) also recognizes the importance of job significance among senior employees.

Job satisfaction shows consistently that work-related attitudes are more positive with increasing age in surveys of employed adults. Senior workers may have a different perspective on work than younger adults. For senior workers, survival needs are less likely to be urgent as they will probably have reached the maximum income for their jobs. Senior
workers report that job satisfaction is more closely related to intrinsic or internal rewards of work (Sterns and Miklos, 1995). This theory supports the findings of Keuning, related to Maslow's theory.

As people grow older they find it important to reach a certain balance between their work and their private life. This is also linked up with their changing needs. Senior workers demand for flexible working hours, also keeping health issues in the back of their minds. The degree to which the employer can adjust to these needs affects the level of job satisfaction of the senior employee.

**Self-development among senior employees**

Today's society has self development high in its standard. The younger generation is used to setting goals for themselves with regard to what they want to achieve. A lot of managers are of opinion that employees are responsible themselves for their development and career. However, a lot of senior employees expect their managers to come up with initiatives concerning their development and career path (Heymann and Terlien, 2003). They are not used to taking initiative in this area. A coaching leadership style would be very appropriate for this age group. In that way the manager can show the different possibilities and the employee gets a better overview of what is possible for him/her and can subsequently make his/her decision.

**Knowledge of the senior employee**

A study of Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) explains that there exists a strong positive association between adult age and knowledge level. Tacit knowledge needs to be transferred from the senior employee to the younger one, since senior employees have built up a lot of experience and organizational know-how. Senior employees can be reticent in sharing their knowledge with younger employees, being afraid to become redundant afterwards.

Currently a lot of organizations are thinking about how to convince their senior workers to stay longer, because employers might face the loss of a significant amount of knowledge and know-how. However, several recent studies have shown (Henkens, 1998) that a vast majority of the senior workers themselves would like to withdraw from the labor force at the earliest possible opportunity. A well known question among senior employees is: "How long do you still have to work?". It is therefore important that managers start considering how they can transfer the knowledge that is present in these senior employees before they leave. This leads us to the problem definition of this article.

**Problem definition**

From all the information above we can draw a couple of interesting conclusions. The first conclusion is that a lot of managers do not see the urgency of taking measures with regard to their ageing workforce and that they are not aware of the serious problems the massive retirement can cause with regard to the loss of knowledge. Another conclusion we can draw is that KM is an activity that can contribute to the preservation of knowledge and the distribution of it. When we combine these two findings we see that KM can serve as a tool to help managers to transfer the knowledge that is present in the senior employee in order to overcome the imminent loss of knowledge. The question is how this can be done adequately. To determine this, we need to take a look at the factors that determine the success of KM and how these factors can be applied to the senior employee. This brings us to the goal and problem definition of this article.

The goal of this article is to come to a number of guidelines in which the specific characteristics of the senior employee are coupled to the critical success factors (CSFs) of knowledge management. By using these guidelines as a starting point the human resource manager will be able to manage knowledge among this particular age more effectively than before.
This brings us to the following problem definition: which critical success factors of knowledge management can be aligned to the senior employee to enhance the effectiveness of this activity (among this age group)?

This problem definition is going to be discussed by using the following sub-questions:
1. What are the CSFs of KM?
2. How can these CSFs be aligned to the senior employee?
3. What are the implications for the HR manager?

Before starting to answer the problem definition, the limitations of this article need to be discussed.

Limitations
Knowledge management is a broad concept and definitions of KM are still developing. This article will focus on the human factor of knowledge management, using the definition provided by Rastogi.

A lot of studies (e.g. Abou-Zeid, 2002; Malhotra and Galletta, 2003) argue that information technology can assist KM in an important way. Although this article recognizes the importance of information systems within KM it will not address this aspect of KM. It will focus on the human and social processes of KM.

A lot of different processes are incorporated in KM; this article will focus on guaranteeing knowledge and distributing knowledge, since these are the two basic processes of KM that come to the front when employees leave the organization. These basic processes involve underlying processes, which includes knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is one of the most important processes when knowledge needs to be transferred, since these processes are mutually exclusive.

Furthermore it is important to stress the intention of this article. This is not to provide managers with a recipe that needs to be followed to solve the problem. Therefore organizations are far too diverse, and unique. Other limitations due to organizational culture and business sector are therefore also relevant to mention; specific organizational cultures and business sectors may require different approaches.

In addition, national or society cultures can have their influences. For example, in Asian countries senior employees are much more respected since values of respect for the elderly are ingrained in Asian cultures. While the level and forms of respect are swiftly changing, the value of older persons is still recognized in most Asian and Pacific region societies (ESCAP, 2001). These cultural differences between nations and societies can have influence on how processes of KM take place.

This article explores the opportunities for HR managers in a broad context and its intention is to provide a number of general guidelines to HR managers how they can prevent the loss of knowledge when senior employees leave the company; a starting point where they can begin to address this issue.

This article is based on extensive literature review and conversations in the field with MA M. Diekstra, she is the project leader of the project “Exploration of labor prospects by senior employees” (see appendix for further details). This project had the main focus to develop a route for senior employees to assist them in their self development, by looking at their past experiences, discovering where they are now and where they want to go in the future.

The information from the literature review and the conversations were used to come to the characteristics of senior employees and the critical success factors of knowledge management.

Critical success factors of knowledge management
The success of a KM initiative depends on many factors, some within human control, some less or not at all. A critical success factor is a performance area of critical importance in
achieving consistently high productivity. There exist two categories of critical success factors: business processes and human processes. This article will focus on the human processes.

Theorists do not completely agree on what the critical success factors of KM are. Below several views will be discussed, thereafter the final five will be presented, which will be used in this article.

**Bixel’s four-pillar model and Davenport’s and Probst’s list**

Different theorists describe different CSFs for KM. Bixler (2002) is one of them. He developed a four-pillar model to describe success factors for KM implementation. These four pillars consist of: leadership, organization, technology and learning. Leadership is concerned with the fact that managers develop business and operational strategies to survive and position for success in today’s environment. The pillar “organization” stresses the fact that the value of knowledge creation and collaboration should be intertwined throughout an organization. Operational processes must align with the KM framework and strategy, including all performance metrics and objectives. Technology enables and provides the whole infrastructure and the tools where KM can rely on. Furthermore Bixel stresses the fact that without learning a KM strategy will not survive; managers must recognize that knowledge resides in people, and knowledge creation occurs in the process of social interaction and learning.

Davenport and Probst developed a similar, but a more extensive list of CSFs. Their CSFs are leadership, performance measurement, organizational policy, knowledge sharing and acquisition, information systems structure, and benchmarking and training.

**The five CSFs of KM**

After the literature review of above and after consulting additional articles and research (Holowetzki, 2002; Chourides et al., 2003) this article will use the following five CSFs that emphasize the human factor within knowledge management:

1. Coaching leadership style.
2. Structure, roles, and responsibilities.
3. Emphasis on learning and education.
4. Attention to motivation, trust, reward and recognition.
5. Establishing the right culture.

Below these different success factors will be discussed in more detail.

**Coaching leadership style**

Management support is essential for the success of KM initiatives. Coaching leadership shown by the managers enhances the value and strategic quality of KM initiatives and sends a signal to all employees that managers view KM as an important activity in their organization to undertake. It is important that the leader fosters open knowledge sharing by creating an environment that is built on trust.

“A well planned and effective knowledge transfer between the different generations of the workforce is of great importance.”
Structure, roles and responsibilities

The organizational structure has to support sharing of knowledge. The collection and validation of knowledge, the availability of the appropriate IT infrastructure, and "help systems" that enable employees to share knowledge, all require appropriate structures within the organization. The organizational structure should also encourage the formation of teams, work groups, and communities of practice. Furthermore it is important that knowledge sharing is encouraged across role and functional boundaries.

Emphasis on learning and education

By focusing on learning and education, new knowledge is created, which can help an organization to develop new innovative ideas. But during a learning process knowledge is also shared among individuals and they can learn from each other. In this way a bonding process between senior and the younger employee is initiated.

Attention to motivation, trust, reward and recognition

It is important that the contributors of knowledge and re-users of knowledge are assured that they have nothing to fear or be anxious about being discarded when giving knowledge "away" or by using "other people's" knowledge; a trustful environment is therefore an important goal to achieve. In business organization, trust has been identified as an essential condition for people to share knowledge and expertise (Nottingham, 1998).

The knowledge provider has to be specifically rewarded and compensated for doing something that is not explicitly stated in his or her contract. It is therefore important to reward sharing of knowledge. The reward system should be in balance with regard to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

Establishing the right culture

Creating the right culture for KM, considering the factors mentioned above, is very important, especially since other success factors are influenced by the organizational culture. Establishing a culture that enhances KM is a process and cannot be achieved overnight; it might take several years to adapt an organizational culture. However, when the right culture has been established KM can take place very effectively. Wah (1999) suggests that no KM program can succeed a shift in the culture of the organization.

Alignment of the senior worker to the CSFs of KM

In this part of the article possibilities to tailor the critical success factors to the senior employee are discussed, so that KM among this age group can take place as effective as possible.

A coaching leadership style

This leadership style is important for knowledge management since employees become conscientious about the fact that management values knowledge sharing. On the other side a coaching leadership style (as discussed earlier) has also a positive influence on the self-development of senior employees. When a manager sits down with his/her employee and reflects on things achieved in their lives and what is still possible in the future, senior employees can regain their enthusiasm and start to feel more committed to the organization (again). This increases job satisfaction and also benefits knowledge sharing. Career planning is often only done with younger employees (Zetlin, 1992), but this can be also an important tool to motivate the senior employee.

Structures, roles and responsibilities

Senior employees value the feeling of usefulness in their daily activities at work. This possibility could be created by letting the senior employee actively share their experience and know-how with younger employees. By giving senior employees responsibility and an active role in knowledge transfer and sharing they feel useful at work. This again increases
the motivation (the senior employee experiences the intrinsic rewards) which also benefits knowledge sharing. By creating this opportunity the knife cuts two ways.

**Emphasis on learning and education**

Senior employees are willing to learn and want to develop themselves, but they need an active approach from their managers, who help them to see where their area of interests lays. Most of the time this active style is absent and seniors are not offered the opportunity to engage in new projects or trainings. A lot of HR managers do not really offer senior employees educational trainings, since they do not see the benefits this can deliver to the company. This critical success factor of KM needs a lot of improvement with regard to the senior employee.

**Attention to motivation, trust, rewards and recognition**

Older employees are motivated in a different way, as described earlier in this article. They value the intrinsic rewards of work, like experiencing feelings of respect and recognition. This could be achieved by creating opportunities for senior employees in which they can feel appreciated and respected, for example, in a mentor relationship with a younger employee. I will come back to this possibility later on.

Trust is an important factor to reassure that people share their knowledge and know-how. It is important that the environment in which the senior employee works feels safe, so that they do not have the idea that when they share their knowledge they will become superfluous in the eyes of their managers.

**Establishing the right culture**

A senior employee needs an organizational culture where there exists trust and respect. A culture in which there are possibilities for flexible working hours and where their knowledge and know-how is recognized and appreciated. In a lot of organizations this is not the case and managers have negative images and ideas about the senior employee, this makes it difficult to create a culture that stimulates KM among this particular age group. A study performed by Taylor and Walker (1998), also acknowledges the importance of establishing the right culture, since the culture of an organization acts as a key factor in shaping orientations towards senior employees.

**Implications for the human resource manager**

In order for managers to effectively manage all the knowledge that is present in the senior worker, it is first important that these managers become conscientious of the value of senior employees. They should step out the mindset that holds all the negative images and presumptions about the senior employee. A positive vision that senior employees can still be of great importance to the organization and that they are of great value should replace the old, negative vision. Only after this goal is obtained the next (more practical) steps towards effective knowledge management can take place.

Managers should start talking with senior employees about what their self development needs are and where they want to go with respect to their careers. They should show their senior employees that they value them and encourage them to undertake new activities.

Managers should establish teams or work groups that contain both senior and junior employees. In this way the cooperation between the younger and the more experienced employee is stimulated and they can inspire each other and learn from each other, by sharing their knowledge. Developing mentor relationships is also a possibility, in these relationships specific organizational know-how can be transferred and shared.

Managers should also reward knowledge transfer between generations. This means creating confidence that experienced employees who pass on their knowledge to younger colleagues not need to be afraid of being replaced by them. This also has to do with building up a certain level of trust within the organization.
Managers must be aware of the fact that senior employees have other needs and therefore maintain a life-phase oriented HR development strategy. This strategy should make clear that senior employees have needs for flexible working hours and a balance between work and private life.

A culture which fosters the senior employee and in which KM can prosper needs to be created. Figure 3 visualizes this culture.

This culture entails factors that are important for stimulating knowledge sharing among senior employees, but also entails factors that are critical to the success of KM in general. By establishing a culture as depicted above KM can start to take place in a more effective way among senior employees.

An organizational culture is, of course, not only created by HR managers, the whole organization needs to contribute to its establishment. However, a lot of activities that are undertaken by the HR manager can add to the right culture for KM.

Conclusion

This article has quite extensively discussed the issues of KM and the developments within the workforce that took place over the last couple of years. The main reason for doing this is the lack of understanding that turns out to exist among managers about the impact the great loss of organizational knowledge and know-how, that is threatening many organizations, can have within the upcoming years. By discussing the issues in more detail the author hopes HR managers start to become conscientious about the possible problems.

Figure 3 The ideal culture for effective KM among senior employees
In today’s literature, the two topics (KM and the senior employee) discussed in this literature review, have received only little attention from researchers; this literature review is one of the first scientific articles that does explicitly link the senior employee to the process of KM.

However, some organizations are starting to understand the need for knowledge transfer among their own senior employees and the one’s of their customers, like IBM (IBM Consulting Services, 2006). Several other authors address the issue of the ageing workforce and the impact on the knowledge industry (Bradly, 2005). Others stress the factors of how to deal with senior employees in terms of human resource development and training (Rhebergen and Wognum, 1997; Armstrong-Stassen and Templer, 2005).

This article has investigated how KM can take place in an effective way among senior employees, by looking at the CSFs of KM and aligning these CSFs to this particular age group. The first sub-question was: “what are the CSFs of KM?”. Different theorists mention different critical success factors of KM, but when looking specifically at the ones that emphasize the human factor, five CSFs come to the fore:

1. Coaching leadership style.
2. Structure, roles, and responsibilities.
3. Emphasis on learning and education.
4. Attention to motivation, trust, reward and recognition.
5. Establishing the right culture.

The last factor comprises a significant part of the other factors; the other factors all have their influence on the organizational culture.

The second sub-question was: “how can these CSFs be aligned to the senior employee?”. It appears to be the case that the CSFs of KM can be aligned very successfully to the senior employee. Mainly, because a lot of the critical success factors of KM contain aspects that are valued highly among the senior employee (attention to recognition, trust) or aspects where this age group can benefit by (a coaching leadership style; emphasis on learning, education; and assigning responsibility).

The third sub-question was: “what are the implications for the HR manager?”. The most important implication for the HR manager is that they should take a more proactive management style towards the senior employee. They should guide them in their self-development and assist them with deciding on their goals. When this happens, the senior employee experiences the feeling of being appreciated again and than more practical steps that will benefit KM more directly can be taken.

The problem definition of this article that had to be answered was: “which critical success factors of Knowledge Management can be aligned to the senior employee to enhance the effectiveness of this activity? (among this age group)”. During the writing of this article the author discovered that there exist a lot of synergetic opportunities between a more proactive management style towards senior employees and effective KM among this group of employees. Therefore, the implications and recommendations for the HR manager point mainly towards an approach that stimulates this leadership style. When this management style is initiated by the HR manager the critical success factors of KM can be very well aligned to the senior employee and the level of effectiveness of KM among this age group will be able to increase significantly. However, further research in this area is recommended, also because the level of impact can differ for each organization.

Furthermore it has become clear that there exist lot of literature that comes to a negative image of the senior employee, but also a lot that comes to a positive image. Mapping out the real situation at micro-level is therefore important.

This article is not extensively based on direct empirical findings, therefore further research is needed to verify, falsify, specify and complete the recommendations made in this article and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. Undertaking further research in this area is
strongly recommended, especially since the significant social relevance of this issue. Further (empirical) research should point out how the effectiveness of KM can be stimulated among senior employees and which theories are relevant to consult in this area. Maybe after more research and bringing the findings into practice HR managers are able to turn the question among senior employees: “How long do you still have to work?” into: “how long do you still can work?” and will it be possible to optimize the effectiveness of KM among this age group.

Recommendations

The implications and conclusions mentioned above point towards a more proactive management style; organizations should face the current developments and start to invest in their senior employees again. But how and where to start?

HR managers should start to map out the current situation in the organization in order to develop a social chart of the organization’s personnel file. The company needs to get clear what kind characteristics, based on hard figures, can be assigned to the different age groups present within the organization. Managers need to look at, for example, the age structure of the organization and at retention rates and training participation of employees. When management has fulfilled this task, it should start looking at which trends can be discovered and what the backgrounds of the figures are. Based on trends and backgrounds, the organization can determine if action is needed. By doing this an honest and sincere view of the different groups of employees can be formed and presumptions that might exist can be eliminated. Management also becomes more conscientious about the situation in their organization.

The next step the HR management should take is to actively involve the employees themselves in the process. This can be done by asking them about the bottlenecks they experience and other experiences they have with regard to the management of personnel, but also by individual interviews between HR manager and senior employee in which self development issues are discussed. In this way the awareness among employees about the issue will increase and management will also demonstrate that it is undertaking some “real” action. This is also a knowledge sharing activity, which positively influences KM.

It will not be easy to establish a complete change in organizational culture. In today’s society a lot of prejudices exist about senior employees and a lot of regulations are aimed at resignment of senior employees (although this currently starts to change). It is therefore important that a basis for structural cultural change is created and HR managers should take an active position in this process. They should appoint the value of senior employees, refute the presumptions that exist and change their personnel policy.

When senior employees experience that management is really changing their point of view, their trust in management increases and management can then start to implement activities that facilitate KM, like mentoring relationships and mixed teams. Subsequently, knowledge sharing and transfer can take place and the organizations can begin to work towards effective KM.

References


Heymann, F.V. and Terlien, M.H.D. (2003), Spelen met je toekomst, 50-plussers op weg naar zingeving, (“Playing with your future, employees who are 50 and above on their way to sensemaking”).


Further reading


Appendix

This appendix contains the summarized content of the conversation the author had on the 16th of June 2005 with MA M. Diekstra at the “Haagse Hogeschool/TH Rijswijk”. M. Diekstra is the project leader of the project “Exploration of labour prospects by senior employees” (“Arbeidstoekomstverkenning door Ouderen”). This project had the main focus to develop a route for senior employees to assist them in their self development, by looking at their past experiences, discovering where they are now and where they want to go in the future.

M. Diekstra told a lot about the current situation many organizations with regard to the senior employee; how managers see them and how senior employees think and act. She emphasized the fact that the senior employees get motivated by undertaking activities that they see as useful and that are meaningful for them. She also pointed out that it is important that managers support self-development among this age group, since older employees are not used to take initiatives themselves.

It was very interesting to notice that a lot of the issues she expressed were also discovered during the author’s literature review. The most important things she told were that a lot of managers think negatively about the senior employee and that therefore the senior employee is somehow stagnated in his/her self-development. Senior employees often do not see the opportunities that are still within or outside the organization they are working for. The most important thing that needs to change, according to M. Diekstra, is the negative mindset a lot of managers have. Only after this mindset is altered and the senior employee experiences this change, managers will be able to increase enthusiasm and job satisfaction among this age group.

During this conversation the author realized that a more active management approach towards the senior employee can also benefit the management of knowledge among this age group. When senior employees regain their enthusiasm and trust in their managers they will be tended to share their experience and knowledge more often.

About the author

Floor Slagter is studying Business Administration at the Free University in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She finished her Bachelor degree (specialization consultancy industry) and is now continuing her studies to earn a masters degree in human resource management. She is currently following an MBA summer course at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA. This article is the direct result of her bachelor thesis. Floor Slagter can be contacted at: fslagter@feweb.vu.nl