

# Preserving Employee Know-How

Retain and transfer the knowledge of departing top performers using cognitive task analysis.



By Deborah A. Peluso

**W**hen faced with the loss of key talent, managers often stand by helplessly and lament the volume of wisdom walking out the door. Workers inevitably feel the pain a colleague's departure causes. That pain is immediate when others must take on the work of the exiting employee. But the true pain comes when no one retains the necessary expertise.

If managers make any attempt to transfer knowledge, they often focus on documenting steps to perform discrete tasks. But, organizational wisdom can't be boiled down to standard operating procedures. Employees build a repertoire of experiences that they rely on to perform well. If you can't keep the employee, try to keep the knowledge.

## Harvesting Wisdom

Top performers often aren't conscious of what they do that makes them perform well. Researchers call this "tacit" knowledge. It is hard to draw out unless you ask the right questions. Cognitive task analysis, in which practitioners use semi-structured interview guides to elicit information, can help uncover this expertise.

Using cognitive task analysis, managers can interview departing top performers on various dimensions of job know-how. For each dimension, the manager should ask for a

story, example or insight that reveals thinking, judgment and problem-solving skills. Following is a list of sample questions:

**Time orientation.** *Is there a time when you walked into the middle of a problem and knew exactly how things got there and where they were headed?*

**Systems thinking.** *Can you provide an example of when to pay attention to the whole picture? What are the major elements you have to know and track?*

**Paying attention.** *Have you had any experiences where you noticed things going on that others didn't catch or see?*

**Efficiency.** *Are there any tricks or tips you've learned over time to get this job done faster or more efficiently, or to get better results?*

**Innovating.** *Can you think of an example where you have improvised?*

**Self-awareness.** *Can you think of a time when you realized that you would need to change your method or adjust your style?*

**Atypical situations.** *Can you describe when you spotted deviation from the norm?*

**Misleading information.** *Have there been times when your information systems or equipment pointed to one course of action but your gut told you to do something else?*

Everyone on the team should be in the interview. Team members can review their notes; rate the difficulty, frequency and importance of the tasks they need to learn; and help outline a transition plan.

Tapping the wisdom of the workforce should not be done in a crisis. If managers deploy this strategy, practice it and leverage employee wisdom routinely, they will never again find themselves standing by helplessly as wisdom walks out the door. ■

*The author is owner of The Change Collaborative LLC, a change management consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio. She can be reached at [www.thechangecollaborative.com](http://www.thechangecollaborative.com).*