Knowledge Transfer and the Emerging Generation

Perspectives and Challenges

The
Center
for
Generational
Studies

Introduction

With the explosion of information and technology over the past 30 years, transferring knowledge from one generation to another has become more critical, and more difficult, than any time in history. Yet organizations worldwide are only now beginning to discover the challenges associated with identifying, codifying and transferring the vast amount of data possessed by veteran contributors. This report is designed to help you accomplish two goals:

1. Develop an understanding of the critical role knowledge transfer will play within your organization going forward, *and*
2. Identify the challenges associated with accomplishing this massive transfer of information and wisdom.

For additional information on how the Center can assist you in implementing a successful knowledge transfer effort, contact us at:

    1-800-227-5510 *or*
    info@generationaldiversity.com

Skills for Now...skills for Later: A Perspective on Learning Expectations

One of the most distinct workplace differences I have observed in the past several years is the contrast between the learning expectations of older and younger workers. Traditionally, employees accepted the training they were given at face value as a part of the employment contract. If your manager said to go to this class, you went—but not anymore. Young workers

Young workers are a lot more concerned about what they are learning and why.
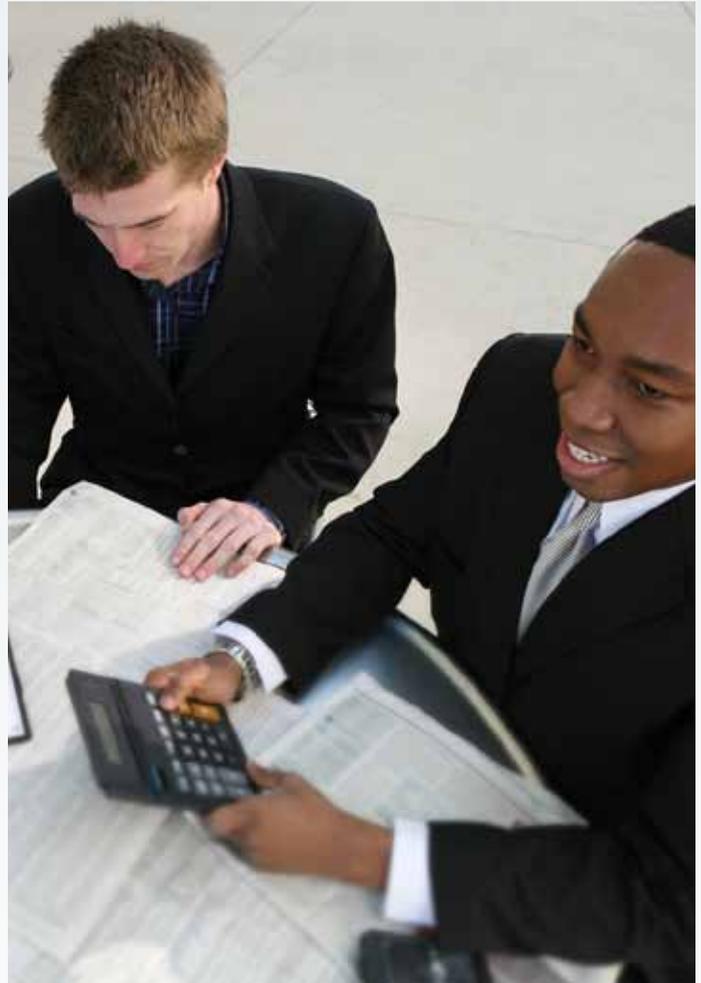
are a lot more concerned about what they are learning and why.

I started reflecting on this after a conversation with a 30-something technology manager. He mentioned he saw a distinct difference in the ways those he supported took to learning new software. "My older colleagues look at training as something the organization provides to further the organization's goals," he said. "They assume that this is pretty much the place where they will use the skills acquired.

"My younger colleagues draw a distinction between organizationally-specific content and that which is transferable to other situations. For example," he said, "learning an application that is proprietary to our firm is something they will only do on the clock. But give them a task they know will enhance a resume and they'll spend the weekend mastering it."

Since that conversation, I have informally surveyed managers and found their perceptions to be similar. So what can be learned from this little piece of unscientific research?

First, a manager/director might conclude that emerging professionals understand the value of transferable skills and are more strategic in their approach to acquiring them. Offered the choice between instruction on learning specific to the organization and taking a class that broadens their overall versatility, they will take the latter. This means that a manager will need to do a better job of explaining the value of training on proprietary content. An incentive might also be appropriate such as access to a mentoring program or additional training on something they might find more useful career-wise.

Second, a manager/director should consider how training is provided, especially if that training is for organizationally-specific purposes. Too much of training is still mired in classrooms and taught by talking heads. Making the training interactive, entertaining, and stimulating encourages them to embrace the content with more verve.

Third, a manager/director needs to consider the learner's motivations. I would be the last person to deny instruction to someone eager to learn it. That said, I might also be suspicious of someone who seems to take every class possible but does not appear to be all that devoted to the firm long term. Sure, the versatility might come in handy at some point, but only if he or she remains with the organization. If it appears that this individual looks upon the firm as simply a training ground from

Skill acquisition is changing not only in delivery, but also in perception of value and content.

which to move elsewhere, it is best to consult with the person about these observations and challenge the veracity of his or her intent.

Training and skill acquisition is changing not only in delivery but also in perception of value and application. For this reason alone, all need to stay ahead of the curve. To further explore the topic of grooming the next generation of leaders visit the Leadership page at: **www.generationaldiversity.com**

From OJT to DVD: Knowledge Management and the Emerging Generations
(Originally published in Knowledge Management magazine)

The transfer and management of knowledge will continue to bedevil organizations for decades to come. While technology possesses a number of barriers, the successful collection of wisdom and insights from veteran workers and the transfer

of this knowledge to the emerging generations may well set forth the most insurmountable of obstacles due to the human interactions required. What follows are five trends we believe are the most formidable of these barriers. Consider the question(s) at the end of each topic to assess how it may impact your actions and the actions of those around you.

Perception of the value and relevance of knowledge
The value of knowledge must be measured in different ways. Skills may be essential to daily operations. But the vision and insights gathered over years of experience set organizational strategy, not to mention helping to avoid crises when they appear. But how will those in the emerging generations perceive the value of knowledge they may not comprehend or appreciate at the present time? Using the ease of technology as their guide, some have made the leap that if a certain body of knowledge is not available in a digital form, it must no longer be relevant. In other cases, this knowledge may not appear meaningful since application of it is not necessary immediately. It will be incumbent upon organizations to convince younger workers of the value of knowledge along with delivering it in a way that demonstrates relevancy.

Questions to consider: What steps does your organization need to take to convince young users of the relevance and applicability of a particular base of knowledge? What kinds of information within your environment will prove particularly challenging to transfer and manage?

Knowledge may not appear meaningful since application of it is not necessary immediately.

The impact of convenience on critical thinking
Technology has always been a mixed blessing. Society appears to be migrating toward a model of menu-driven thinking that replaces traditional problem solving approaches with choice-oriented applications. On one hand, this kind of technology can enhance the delivery of training and instruction by offering applications that appeal to young minds by addressing their expectation of entertainment and stimulation. On the other hand, it can be argued that the nuances of critical thinking are lost on those who develop a reliance on menu-driven options to make decisions. Yes, simulations and games may offer solutions to this challenge, but the technology and true integration of this approach is just now in its infancy.

Questions to consider: What knowledge bases within your organization are amenable to being managed using a technological platform? What knowledge bases will prove

difficult because of their problem-solving-oriented nature? What steps can you take to address the challenges of both?

The influence of impatience and non-stop stimulation
The emerging generations are products of a 24/7/365 multi-media environment that leaves many uncomfortable with silence. The nature of knowledge transfer, especially within non-technical realms, is based largely on patient information gathering and process. A classic example of this is the passing of wisdom and insights from a veteran to an emerging leader. The methodology for this typically consists of story-telling, discussion and repeated exposure to the environment. For the impatient young learner, this may be a struggle, especially if the mentor is less than effective at investing the protégé in the value of what she or he has to offer. These relationships cannot be forced, yet contain the transfer of knowledge critical to organizational health over time.

Questions to consider: How can you best coach veteran managers and leaders to effectively work with emerging professionals in transferring their base of knowledge and wisdom? How can you convince emerging workers of the value of story-telling, interviews and reflection as effective means for learning and embracing a non-technical knowledge base?

Rejection of veteran contributors' knowledge
It has been assumed by many that young workers will reject the knowledge of experienced contributors out of hand. But this is not so much an outright rejection as it is a search for relevance. While experience is hailed as buttressing knowledge, it can also bedevil the transfer of critical information by obscuring it

with non-essential data, insights and stories. After all, the older we become, the more we tend to use the past as a reference point for the present. Emerging workers have little patience for enduring the embellished tales of the thirty-year veteran. This is not new news. But it has been exacerbated by the impatience and over-stimulation mentioned above. If knowledge is to be transferred successfully, both parties must work collaboratively. Veteran workers must distill their experiences and wisdom down to the essentials. Emerging workers much accept the fact that the nuances of this transfer will take considerable time and effort with those currently possessing the knowledge.

Questions to consider: How can you encourage workplace veterans to share their knowledge and insights in ways that are most appealing to the emerging generations? How can you encourage young workers to embrace the relevance of the knowledge they are learning and to work collaboratively with veteran contributors to facilitate the process?

If knowledge is to be transferred successfully, both parties must work collaboratively.

Expectation of continuous learning

The emerging generations have concluded that knowledge and skills equal versatility. This versatility, they believe, will enhance their ability to remain consistently employed in a meaningful way. They willingly embrace opportunities to develop new proficiencies and learn new disciplines. For this reason alone, most eagerly search for novel experiences and knowledge bases to conquer. The acquisition of these skills and knowledge bases however, should not be equated with topical mastery. Veteran workers are sometimes put off by the youthful desire of some young professionals because they see little evidence of an ability to apply these newly acquired skills within the environment. Given a choice between working with a 20-year veteran who has a high-school diploma and a newly minted MBA, they will tend to embrace the person with the years of experience.

Organizations will need to effectively manage the transfer of knowledge to those most willing to embrace mastery of a topic over time. This will require a system that effectively addresses several issues: (1) reluctance on the part of older workers to share knowledge that some equate with job security; (2) skepticism on the part of emerging workers that the knowledge is relevant to them, not just within in the organization, but in a broader context; (3) desire to learn using delivery methods which young workers embrace such as simulations and Web 2.0 applications; and (4) encourage among emerging workers the patience, reflection, and endurance required to master the bases of knowledge contained within their areas of responsibility.

Questions to consider: How can you and your organization successfully address the issues identified above? What resources will be required to do so? What obstacles can you anticipate in addressing these issues? For an in-depth review

What information will prove particularly challenging to transfer and manage?
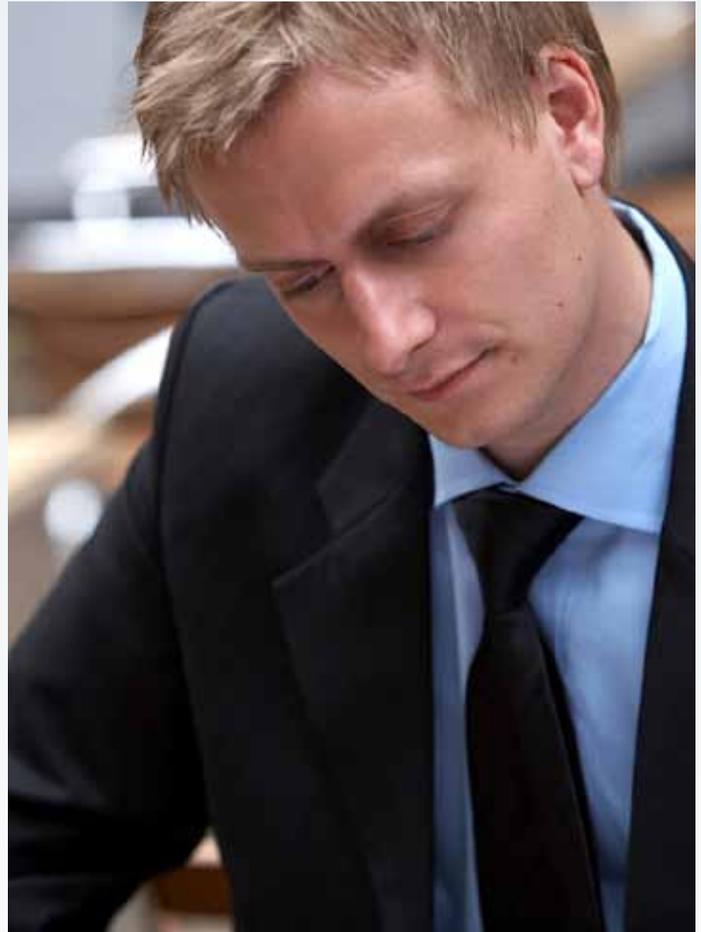
of the critical issues that will affect the transition of leadership as emerging generations assume senior roles, read the *Leadership and the Emerging Generations Special Report.*

Incoming New Geners: How They Will Approach Knowledge Transfer

(Originally published in Smart People magazine)

Those who have inhabited the workplace for the past many years recognize the wealth of information they and their colleagues possess and wonder how best to transfer it to those inheriting their responsibilities. But what about the worldwide generation of workers just now entering the workforce? Ask most of them about the role of knowledge transfer as they enter their jobs and they'll give you a blank stare. This doesn't necessarily mean they're apathetic. It just hasn't occurred to most young workers that this massive transfer of wisdom and insight needs to take place…now. Those of the generation

that has grown up on the Internet assume they can just "Google it." Why bother until they need it?

While so-called explicit knowledge, the information in documentable sources, can be retained and transferred indefinitely, so-called tacit knowledge—the knowledge that supplies the context for application and interpretation of explicit knowledge—expires with the departure of the person possessing it. So how will this emerging generation approach the process of absorbing the knowledge from veteran workers? Here's some of what the hierarchy and the departing workers should know:

New Geners will look for value. Young workers factor time into everything they do. Ask them to memorize routine company procedures to which they cannot relate and they'll stall. Ask them to learn software that can be leveraged in other environments and they'll spend the weekend mastering the application. Any knowledge to be transferred needs to be delivered in a way that demonstrates value and relevance. Taking time to explain the relevance of what they are learning is a key to investing them in the process. Continually reinforcing this relevance through examples and application will help maintain the engagement of their multi-channeling minds.

They will look for delivery that is convenient. E-learning is so yesterday. Those in the emerging generation are looking for ways to learn and grow on their schedule and in their preferred environments. This increasingly means mobile devices such as PDAs and cell phones. The current human resources and

Emerging learners will change channels if not engaged within the first few minutes.

training press is alive with discussions about the efforts being made to deliver instruction and support through applications such as Twitter. While this evolution is still in its infancy, be assured that young professionals will embrace these platforms and take them to levels that challenge organizations to keep apace. Those responsible for knowledge management and transfer will find themselves faced with the same challenges.

They will look for delivery that is engaging. Young professionals are not static learners. Even though they have endured the monotony of many high school and college classes, they have also mastered the non-stop engagement of video gaming and other interactive devices. While older workers are more likely to sit patiently through didactic presentations and training, emerging learners will begin to change channels if not engaged within the first few minutes. Organizations will be faced with the challenge of placing both explicit and tacit knowledge in formats that stimulate young learners using interactive applications that

employ video and audio clips as their base for instruction. Think YouTube and TeacherTube on steroids.

They will want to influence the transfer process. Where veteran workers have been content to take the learning and mentoring processes at face value, young professionals will not sit still for methods they find not to their liking. Society has taught these individuals to speak up and suggest solutions. To dictate the terms of knowledge transfer will only alienate them and encourage them to look for ways to obtain the knowledge on their terms, thereby circumventing organizational practices. Rather than working to control knowledge transfer methodologies, organizations will be better off learning from these young workers on how to best engage them. Then a more dynamic learning environment will evolve.

They will interpret and apply knowledge in their own ways. When one looks at the creativity brimming forth from some in their teens and twenties, it is easy to understand why this generation sees no limits on how they can accomplish the tasks at hand. While this is certainly not true of all young workers, organizations that foster an environment of flexibility based on outcome will thrive more readily than those that follow a protocol that confines this youthful creativity and enthusiasm. Certainly clear parameters must be provided to ensure the security and integrity of proprietary knowledge and practices. But strict control over the execution of knowledge transfer should be discouraged.

Strict control over the execution of knowledge transfer should be discouraged.

They will work collaboratively to share knowledge. While some workforce veterans have been known to hoard information because they view it as an element of job security, emerging professionals appear to be at the opposite end of the spectrum. One of the things that can be learned from this generation's focus on electronic networking is that they will bring this practice into the workplace at all levels. The speed with which information is distributed throughout the world is seen everyday in social networking. Using this phenomenon, coupled with their seemingly in-born prowess with technology, it is certainly understandable why today's and tomorrow's young knowledge workers will take the constant sharing of knowledge for granted. But while this phenomenon can be viewed as a strength in transferring knowledge, organizations will have to be more vigilant than ever in protecting their proprietary information.

The canons of knowledge management and transfer have yet to be fully defined. Yet without the input of the emerging generation, these practices may become irrelevant prematurely. Organizations that embrace the skills and desires of these young workers will better ensure the successful transfer of knowledge

in the coming years. For more information about transferring knowledge to the next generation of leaders, listen to the audio program, *Succession Planning and the Emerging Generations.*

Sharing Departing Knowledge in Ways that Appeal to the Emerging Generation
(Originally published in Knowledge Management magazine)

One factor compounding the challenges of knowledge transfer in today's organizations is the distinctly different attitudes and beliefs held by the emerging generation. As this cohort of professionals assumes roles in all corners of the workplace, the evidence suggests that they will approach their jobs in distinctly different ways than veteran contributors. With organizations worldwide seeking to transfer the repository of knowledge possessed by those veteran contributors, it is becoming apparent they will face a formidable challenge in getting young professionals to embrace these troves of insight.

For emerging professionals who have developed a dependence on technology and an addiction to search engines, the thought of learning from those with a long history in the workplace may seem foreign. To many young people, knowledge outside of what can be found digitally seems irrelevant. After all, "If it was truly important, one would be able to find it on-line." While a comment like this may send shivers down the spines of knowledge specialists, it is a reality with which these specialists will have to deal. So how can this best be accomplished?

American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) president, Carla O'Dell, argues that knowledge can be divided into two categories: (1) Explicit knowledge, which can be found in technical reports, process maps, work flows and other documentable sources and (2) Tacit knowledge, which resides in an individual's mind or those of a collective group. This type of knowledge can provide meaningful context for applying the information found in explicit knowledge. For knowledge transfer to be successful, young professionals have to believe that what they will learn is relevant, helpful to their jobs and, over time, their careers. In many organizations, the days of traditional on-the-job training are fast waning. These emerging contributors are hungry for information, but on their terms. Thus the rub. It is only natural for older individuals to train, coach and mentor using the methods they learned throughout their careers. But young professionals expect to learn information using the platforms with which they have grown accustomed. This generally means interactivity with media, video clips, podcasts, gaming, wikis, and so on.

To many young people, knowledge outside of what can be found digitally seems irrelevant.

This conflict presents two issues: (1) Most organizations do not presently possess the means for transferring relevant knowledge via electronic platforms. In some cases, the knowledge cannot be transferred in this manner. In other cases, there is considerable reluctance on the part of those possessing the information to participate in an effort of this nature. (2) Research indicates that while it is certainly possible to transfer explicit knowledge, such as process maps, work rules and standards, this will be a less-than-effective effort without the introduction of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is best delivered on the job during one-on-one and small group coaching interactions. In a 2002 *APQC study* entitled *"Retaining Valuable Knowledge: Proactive Strategies to Deal with a Shifting Workforce,"* the authors maintain "The most effective way to capture, retain and transfer valuable knowledge is to embed that process into the workflow. This not only retains the context, but also links the sources and creators of knowledge while they are still available to learn from each other." Yet there appears to be a reluctance among young people to spend the time it takes to interact with those possessing these insights. Having grown dependent on electronic messaging, many see this as a more efficient way to communicate than "sitting at the feet of the master."

So what needs to be done in marrying tacit and explicit knowledge in a successful transfer to the emerging generations? Here are several strategies to consider:

Evaluate applicants' beliefs about learning and assess their investment in knowledge transfer
It has become apparent that young professionals view the typical job as a contract rather than a calling. As much as they

The most effective way to capture, retain and transfer valuable knowledge is to embed that process into the workflow.

are willing to learn for the purposes of fulfilling their obligations, they also want to learn for the purposes of building their resume and versatility within the marketplace. With this type of a transactional belief, it is certainly understandable that their interest would lie more with learning transferable skills than the native knowledge so integral to any organization.
It is critical, therefore, that applicants be evaluated on the level of investment they might have in learning about the organization itself and how they might contribute long-term. This can be accomplished both passively and actively. Simply observing their visual and auditory cues can provide insight into their interest levels about the firm itself. Listening for off-hand comments, light-hearted responses or stories will provide screeners with insights into applicants' motivations. Xerox Corporation, for instance, has codified this process by assessing the knowledge-sharing behaviors of potential new hires by asking a series of questions designed to show whether a person shares or hoards knowledge.

In a more active way, applicants can be asked to perform tasks individually or in a group that will demonstrate their investment in working with others. Toyota Motor Corporation gathers applicants in a room, for example, and asks them to assemble hundreds of flashlights without providing instructions, only bins of components. While this exercise has been traditionally used to evaluate the leadership potential of participants, it can also be used to observe levels of empathy for and interest in others. Which applicants are curious? Which applicants look to those with more workplace experience for insights? Which applicants seem most willing to nurture the learning in others? All of these characteristics can be tied to a person's desire to learn from co-workers.

Foster an atmosphere of knowledge transfer from the first day of employment

If young applicants perceive that they are joining an environment that promotes the transfer of knowledge in all phases of the business, they will be more likely to embrace learning with enthusiasm. But with an emerging generation that is, by nature, skeptical of corporate initiatives, the implementation of this type of effort must be genuine and be supported at all levels.

The World Bank, for example, has embedded knowledge sharing initiatives into new-hire orientation, training and leadership development. A portion of this is conducted by the organization's retirees. Xerox Corporation developed a Knowledge Management Practitioner Trainee program through which all new hires must go. Northrop Grumman Corporation has established the X-Ref expert locator. All

> Young contributors dismiss what they perceive as outdated information due to the manner in which it was received.

employees must complete a detailed profile which is then used extensively to staff programs.

Coach veteran contributors on both style and methodology of sharing knowledge

The older one gets, the more tempting it is to begin training and mentoring with the words, "I remember when." As much as most veteran contributors have the desire to share what they know, most have never been coached on how to effectively communicate this information. In teaching knowledge-sharing we have to act on two considerations: (1) The style with which the contributor shares what he or she knows and (2) the specific methodologies he or she uses to do so.

The style of sharing knowledge refers to the contributors' abilities to interest emerging learners in what they have to teach them. As mentioned earlier, young contributors sometimes dismiss what they perceive as outdated or irrelevant information due to the manner in which it is conveyed. Most veteran contributors need to be coached on how to convince

younger compatriots that their experience and knowledge is something from which these emerging contributors can learn. Often times, this is accomplished through a combination of mentoring and trial and error with a large dose of patience mixed in. Veteran contributors must also be made aware of the rudiments of how learning takes place so they can do a better job of matching their communication style to that of their younger compatriots.

The World Bank, for instance uses trained staff and retirees to coach managers on how to best promote the transfer of knowledge to those assuming new responsibilities. Without the proper instruction, organizations may lose the opportunity to transfer this knowledge when a discouraged veteran abandons the effort due to what he or she perceives as too much resistance or apathy. Aside from this, the Boeing Company has learned that is generally not effective to match a well-seasoned contributor with a new employee since they will share little in common as workers. The company's knowledge specialists are finding that a five-year gap in ages is more appropriate.

Foster cross-generational communities of practice – APQC has found that one of the most effective means for transferring knowledge is promoting the development and evolution of teams of those individuals with varying experience and expertise for the purpose of sharing their knowledge. These so-called communities of practice serve to promote knowledge sharing and encourage an atmosphere of mutual trust and curiosity between emerging and veteran contributors. The evidence indicates that young professionals are more likely to look on-line than to ask those around them. This, of course, runs counter to the effectiveness of communities of practice.

Create interdependent groups responsible for completing projects.
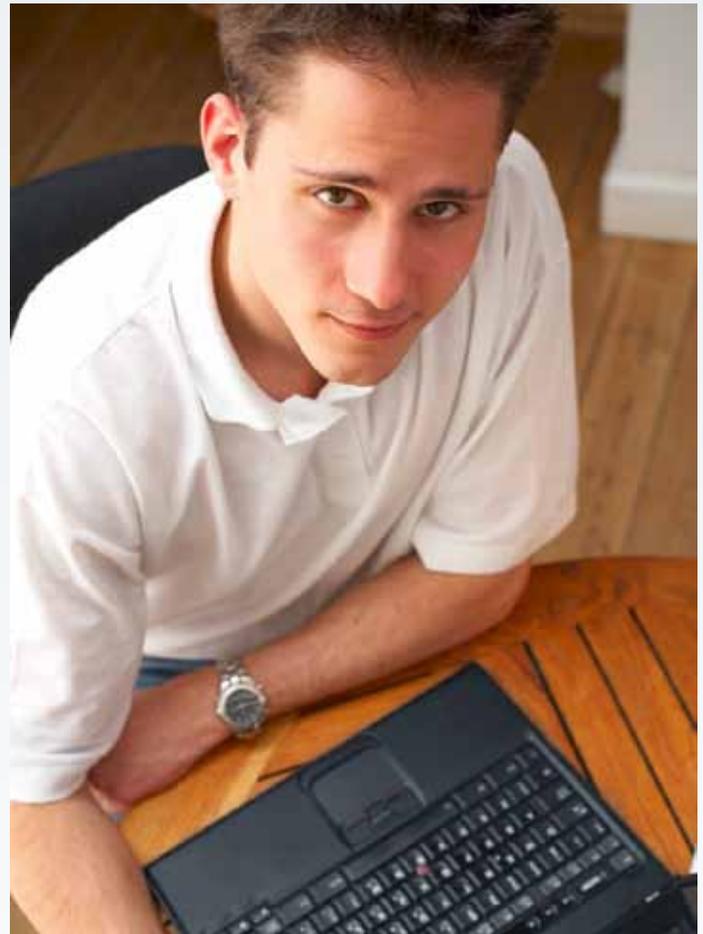
The key to getting young contributors invested in these efforts will be to create interdependent teams and groups responsible for completing tasks and projects. Northrup Grumman Corporation, for example, has developed College Hire, an effort to provide managers with on-boarding checklists, first day lunches, happy hours and mentoring for those new to the company. The focus of this initiative is to get young contributors to invest their energy and focus in the company immediately.

Provide explicit content on platforms that emerging generations find appealing
Today's point-and-click technology is both a blessing and a curse in sharing knowledge. On one hand, many of the rules and work processes so painstakingly outlined in manuals can now be converted into electronic documents. This media also allow organizations to make traditional rote learning more stimulating and entertaining. The next generation of this learning, such as gaming and simulations, is already being embraced by a number of organizations. On the other hand however, this kind of stimulation only reinforces

young contributors' perceptions that learning by discussing is neither efficient or all that informative. Therefore, coupling the transfer of explicit and tacit knowledge will prove challenging in any number of environments.

Provide tacit knowledge in ways that emerging contributors find attractive

Those who have entered the workforce in the past decade are products of a world immersed in fast-paced convenience and options. Everything can be obtained, it appears to them, with the click of a mouse. As these young people continue to fill positions within industry, government, and non-profits, they will approach the work they do influenced by the technology they have embraced along with the influences of a world far different than the one their veteran co-workers experienced in their youth. Yet it is these veteran co-workers who posses the insights and nuances that will enable emerging contributors to apply the explicit knowledge placed before them. It is critical that those sharing knowledge be matched well with those learning. Pairing veteran and emerging contributors must be done with care and deliberation. The Boeing Company, for instance, has created a toolkit for knowledge transfer between the generations. This toolkit includes an electronic survey to determine how to match people for mentoring purposes; a matrix that is used to match people based on their survey answers; an analysis of usage for the different tools such as wikis, blogs, and other electronic means of communicating; a training for managers on the differences between the generations; and a process for helping managers support their employees by creating business goals that address knowledge transfer between the generations.

Best Buy stores has created a network for those selling Microsoft Network products so that salespeople across the country can share strategies and insights. The company has experienced a measurable increase in sales as a result. A second network for the company's mobile product installers has been initiated to assist in providing better technical support to those working with customers. Platforms like these appeal to emerging contributors because of their versatility and immediate response.

Reward and encourage emerging generations' embrace of knowledge transfer

Many in the emerging generation have a strong desire to see defined timelines and outcomes in return for their efforts. Organizations wishing to retain these contributors need to provide evidence of this progress and professional development. At Siemens Corporation, for instance, managers and employees discuss career development annually. As a mandatory part of the discussion, each manager and employee must develop a joint and committed answer to this issue. If the employee indicates that he or she is planning to leave in less than a year, the company has a standard process that must be followed to ensure an effective transfer of knowledge to the next person assuming the role. This serves two critical purposes. (1) It ensures that the organization will have ample time for transition. (2) It demonstrates to young contributors that there is a continuous stream of opportunities for developing skills and assuming more responsibility.

In another example, the World Bank has instituted a knowledge fair competition which has resulted in thousands of entries from staffers within the organization along with countless new programs being funded based on the ideas generated. This kind of endeavor will attract young contributors looking to make their mark, not to mention a desire for networking within the overall organization.

It is a well-known principle that people tend to support what they help to create. Organizations actively embracing knowledge transfer are finding this is no different for the emerging generation. But this cannot just be about plaques and recognition dinners. Formal rewards are never as frequent, and rarely as valuable, as the rewards embedded in the learning activity itself. Those organizations that successfully foster a genuine culture of sharing knowledge will be rewarded with both a productive and long-tenured workforce and the preservation of the native knowledge so precious to its continued existence. To help you implement the strategies suggested in this report, purchase the ***Leadership and the Emerging Generations DVD program.***

About the Author

Robert W. Wendover has been researching and writing about workforce trends for more than 20 years. He currently serves as Managing Director of the Center for Generational Studies. The author of nine books, he is a regular contributor to electronic and print media across the U.S. He has served as a Special Advisor to the American Productivity and Quality Council (APQC) and served on the management faculty of the University of Phoenix for more than 10 years.

The Center for Generational Studies

The Center for Generational Studies has been providing solutions to cross-generation issues and other workplace challenges for more than 20 years. Go to **www.generationaldiversity.com** for more information.

Suggested Reading

DeLong, David W. *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of An Aging Workforce.* Oxford University Press, 2004. ISBN 978-0195170979

Leonard, D. and Swap, W. *Deep Smarts: How to Cultivate and Transfer Enduring Business Wisdom.* Harvard Business Press, 2005. ISBN 978-1591395287

O'Dell, C. and Greayson, C.J. *If Only We Knew What We Know; The Transfer of Knowledge and Best Practice.* Free Press, 1998. ISBN-13 978-0684844749

The Center for Generational Studies