

BRIDGING THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

Part Two

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Like individuals, organizations of all sizes demonstrate what they value most by what they strive to attain and then preserve.

During the Industrial Age, organizational values emphasized physical possessions and warehouse inventories. Even today, most organizations have little trouble producing exhaustive lists that document every facility, piece of equipment and stick of furniture they own. They know the dollar worth of current inventories and raw materials, maybe to the penny.

Airlines frequently boast of their aircraft types and numbers, gates and technology centers. Shipping companies can easily list their trucks, hubs and sorting equipment as valuable physical assets.

Organizations commit tremendous resources to identify, locate and maintain every item of physical property they possess. The reason is simple ... these items are highly valued by the organization.

It is something of a paradox, then, that many of these organizations are led by executives who proudly, and rightly, proclaim that their

most valuable assets are actually their intellectual properties.

For airlines, the only true source of profit during recent difficult business times has been their reservation systems. These combinations of technology and business intelligence require no warehouses nor do they take to the skies. They are the result of seat inventory, flight schedule and yield management knowledge.

The ability to electronically plan, locate, redirect and verify delivery of shipments generates significant new value to shipping organizations.

While intellectual assets like these are considered vital to operational success, few organizations have any type of inventory list that fully describes what they are, where they are located or provide any instruction on their maintenance.

In late 2006, we began a project with the Tulsa Police Department to address just this problem. Tulsa PD, like most modern law enforcement organizations, do far more than patrol neighborhoods, apprehend criminals and write traffic tickets. Today's police department must respond with modern techniques and technologies to a wide variety of criminal activities including cyber crimes and terrorism. Their activities routinely utilize sophisticated methods that were unfamiliar to law enforcement just one generation back.

Most of the officers within the Tulsa Police Department are familiar with of the full breadth of the organization's capabilities. Senior staff, however, was unclear on how to properly maintain and enhance vital organizational knowledge. They face looming retirements across the organization and have already encountered instances of significant knowledge loss when critical people left the organization. These are the same challenges facing most 21st century organizations.

A second concern for TPD is that the general population recognizes a fraction of the services routinely provided by the department. Even more troubling is that members of City Hall, the people who control annual funding, have little awareness of these intellectual assets.

To address this growing knowledge gap, we helped them create a *Knowledge Retention Policy* to identify critical areas of organizational knowledge within the Tulsa Police Department along with an inventory list of these intellectual assets.

DEFINITION

A *Knowledge Retention Policy* or KRP is a formal document that declares the knowledge vital to an organization. A KRP does *not* define an organization's intellectual assets, it simply identifies them and then provides a roadmap on how to find them and how to transfer this knowledge from one generation of employees to the next. One way to think about a Knowledge Retention Policy is as a succession plan for organizational knowledge.

Once created, this document must be reviewed and validated by the senior leadership of the organization. It should be

analyzed and revised regularly to find potential weaknesses in how an organization captures and transfers knowledge.

A Knowledge Retention Policy alerts all members of an organization of the specific collections of expertise that must be continually refined and expanded.

To understand the full nature of a KRP, it is important to understand *KRP Scope*, *Knowledge Areas* and *Knowledge Topics*.

KRP SCOPE

The first act of creating a Knowledge Retention Policy is to clearly identify the scope of the effort. Many organizations have failed in similar endeavors by attempting to take on a scope that is impractically large. "Enterprise studies" attempt to apply some form of study concept to the total business organization. The time required to conduct such studies make them obsolete before they are completed. Further, such scopes typically require an extensive commitment from senior-level members who have little time, and sometimes limited patience, for such activities.

To remain practical, the scope for a Knowledge Retention Policy should be restricted to a single operating unit in the total organization. If the organization knowledge is complex and critical, it may be best to reduce scope to a specific component of an operating unit. To keep scope clear, it is important to also document what will not be included in the Knowledge Retention Policy.

Ideally, the scope of a Knowledge Retention Policy will bound an effort that may be accomplished within 60-90 days. Smaller scopes may be conglomerated to create a total organizational view.

The Tulsa Police Department represents a reasonably independent operating unit within the City of Tulsa. Our scope included the Tulsa PD and city organizations that directly support TPD. Deliberately excluded were any other units within the City of Tulsa.

KNOWLEDGE AREAS

To keep a Knowledge Retention Policy feasible and understandable, the first major activity is to decompose the total scope into recognizable *Knowledge Areas*. Knowledge Areas are arbitrary categories of organizational knowledge that should be familiar and recognizable to people in the organization.

Initial Knowledge Areas are uncovered by examining detailed organizational charts or interviewing senior management. Most organizations create sub-structures to perform critical work. Each sub structure is a likely Knowledge Area candidate. Keep in mind, the intent of the Knowledge Retention Policy is not to validate this organizational structure but to identify the knowledge retained within it.

Among the Knowledge Areas identified during the Tulsa PD study were obvious choices such as the Detective Division, Forensic Lab and Uniform Divisions. Less obvious to the general public would be the Special Operations Division, Training Division and Animal Control.

When the knowledge of a specific sub-structure is extensive and complex, it may be advisable to decompose it into additional Knowledge Areas. For example, we found it helpful to partition Information and Technical Services into the Property Room,

Records, Booking and General Administration Knowledge Areas.

For each Knowledge Area, identify the person who is ultimately responsible for validating the inventory of organization knowledge found within that specific Knowledge Area.

KNOWLEDGE TOPICS

Knowledge Topics are the heart of any Knowledge Retention Policy. They are the distinct groupings of explicit and tacit knowledge that provide the basis for an organization's work. Knowledge Topics are the elusive intellectual assets we are seeking.

Explicit knowledge is the absolute, tangible side of knowledge. It is recognized in tangible facts and formulations. Explicit knowledge is typically the easiest to capture and transfer as it may be represented as pure *data* and *information*.

A flight number, departure city, destination city, gate number, departure time, arrival time and seat assignment are all examples of explicit data. When they are collected into a single structure, they provide information to a passenger about their travel plans.

The advent of advanced technology, massive electronic storage devices and communication capabilities has enabled organizations to create robust software/hardware products to define, capture and transfer this type of organizational knowledge.

Knowledge Topics are commonly composed of deliberate collections of this explicit knowledge.

More challenging is the tacit knowledge of an organization. Tacit knowledge uses the basic data and information of an organization to make decisions. Decision-making is the expert judgment or wisdom of an organization. It is how the organization has learned to interpret the explicit knowledge and make good choices.

This tacit knowledge is typically far more difficult to capture. Portions of it may be found in procedure manuals, job descriptions and expert systems. If it can be defined, it is the result of in-depth, rigorous analysis studies.

Tacit knowledge is also the most overlooked and “at risk” Knowledge Topics of an organization. When an experienced employee leaves an organization, they may leave behind the data and information they used to perform their job function. It is their tacit knowledge, however, that is often lost. New employees are then forced to recreate this knowledge. At best, this is time-consuming and frequently inferior to the original knowledge.

The most significant component of a Knowledge Retention Policy is the list of Knowledge Topics of value to an organization. Unlike the Knowledge Areas, this list holds many surprises, even for people familiar with the total organization.

Within the Special Operations Division Knowledge Area for the Tulsa Police are recognizable Knowledge Topics such as Bomb Unit, Special Operations Team (SWAT), Canine and Motorcycle Unit. Far less recognizable but equally vital would be the Crime Analysis, Electronic Intercept and Joint Terrorism Task Force Knowledge Topics of the Special Investigations Division Knowledge Area.

KNOWLEDGE TOPIC CHARACTERISTICS

Each Knowledge Topic is a formal collection of data, information and processes required to perform the work valued by the organization.

The definition of each Knowledge Topic may be divided into two distinct levels of information. A Level One report lists each Knowledge Topic within a Knowledge Area. A short, narrative description is provided for each Knowledge Topic along with the best current source for this knowledge. A ranking is then given to the Knowledge Topic to show its relative significance to the organization.

Once a Knowledge Topic is formally recognized, the final act is to identify the current state of knowledge transfer. This is done by listing specific *Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms* used to capture, retain and share this Knowledge Topic.

The most common Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms are documentation, apprenticeship, training, cross-training, mentoring and formal or informal communications.

A Level Two report should be prepared that provides the detailed support for each mechanism listed for a Knowledge Topic.

Some of these mechanisms represent efforts already in place and others should be addressed by the organization to insure knowledge is retained, not lost.

FINAL ANALYSIS

Creating a Knowledge Retention Policy is only the beginning. It must be evaluated to

locate missing information and expose organizational risks.

The total report is examined to find missing Knowledge Areas or to see if a current Knowledge Area should be further decomposed.

The person responsible for the Knowledge Area considers the relevance of the Knowledge Topic for the organization. Each of the characteristics are verified for accuracy. Any missing Knowledge Topics are added.

Of greatest concern are Knowledge Topics that are “known” by people who will soon retire, taking their expertise with them.

If a Knowledge Topic is considered vital to the organization, the Knowledge Transfer Mechanisms must be fully defined in a Level Two document to confirm they are current and active. Any gaps must be corrected. Critical gaps may be resolved by launching projects intended to specifically address missing or incomplete knowledge transfers. Active projects that touch any of the “at-risk” Knowledge Topics should be expanded to resolve any perceived deficiencies.

CONCLUSION

A Knowledge Retention Policy provides a formal bridge to move at-risk knowledge into a form that may be retained, shared and used by future organizational generations.

The work of a Knowledge Retention Policy is never complete. New revisions will always be needed and new Knowledge Topics will be routinely added.

A Knowledge Retention Policy officially recognizes the true asset value critical know-how represents to the organization.



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