knowledge transfer

CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: TOOLS FOR MANAGING YOUR COMPANY'S DEEP SMARTS

BY PETER MCATEER
Dorothy Leonard is a long-time professor at Harvard Business School and Walter Swap professor of psychology at Tufts University. Professors Leonard and Swap have collaborated on research for over 15 years and first noticed something unique about ‘expertise’ during the economic boom of the late 1990s. Some people had the capacity to offer unique insights in certain situations that were not based on analytic models or depth of knowledge. They possessed something more – the ability to make good judgments based on contextual knowledge and relevant experience.

The term ‘Deep Smarts’ was first coined by professors Leonard and Swap in their 2004 HBR article and 2005 book of the same name. The term ‘Deep Smarts’ refers to the ‘experienced-based wisdom’ of an organization. Their research on creativity, knowledge transfer, and entrepreneurial decision-making led them to insights about the types of applied knowledge critical to business success. According to the authors – not all knowledge is equal in value and not all experts have ‘Deep Smarts.’ The knowledge most important to your organization is the “practical wisdom: accumulated knowledge, know-how, and intuition gained through extensive experience” directly related to your competitive positioning.

Their original work in 2004-2005 looked at how you identify this type of knowledge and the processes for sharing and developing such wisdom in your organization.

“The best way to transfer such expertise to novices--and, on a larger scale, to make individual knowledge institutional--isn't through PowerPoint slides, a Web site of best practices, online training, project reports, or lectures. Rather, the sage needs to teach the neophyte individually how to draw wisdom from experience. Companies have to be willing to dedicate time and effort to such extensive training, but the investment more than pays for itself.”

- Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap
Their latest book, Critical Knowledge Transfer: Tools for Managing Your Company's Deep Smarts (2014 with co-author Gavin Barton) looks at the tools and techniques companies can use to preserve key knowledge associated with competitive advantage. How do companies that lose key staff — during economic downturns, through retirement, business poaching or turnover — avoid losing their competitive advantage? Key issues become:

- How do you assess the knowledge or ‘deep smarts’ that are critical to your business?
- How do you assess potential losses associated with turnover?
- Are there techniques that accelerate knowledge transfer?
- Are there longer-term investments in training that help preserve and sustain deep smarts?
- How do you know if your knowledge development efforts are successful?

Their latest book is an exceptional follow-up and summary of over a decade of continuous research and relevant to any L&D professional. Sustaining ‘deep smarts’ has a direct return on investment in both short-term performance and longer-term competitive advantage.

“Rather than thinking about transferring the knowledge out of the head of an expert and into the head of a novice, we talk more about re-creating knowledge through guided experience by a knowledge coach, somebody with deep smarts who's motivated to impart his or her wisdom through coaching and who knows how to do it. And the most effective way of re-creating knowledge is not to teach in the usual sense, but to systematically guide the experience of the protégé.”
-Walter Swap
References

Books:


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