Conducting Knowledge-Capturing Sessions with Departing Employees

Overview

This tool describes how to run facilitated knowledge-capturing sessions with departing employees.

Expertise is best gathered by asking the employee to talk about what they know in a semi-structured, facilitated session. Although reading relevant written materials and observing an employee in action (e.g., on the job) are useful for gaining a background in a knowledge domain, to capture accurately what the departing employee know often requires asking them to describe what they know and do. Thus, a knowledge gathering session consists of one or two facilitators and one or more employees. Having multiple employees in the group allows them to build on each other’s thoughts and comments and may generate more complete information as opposed to conducting individual interviews.

During the introduction, explain clearly that the session will be employee centered – that is, the facilitators are not the experts in the subject matter but are there to ask questions and document what the employee says.

Establish expectations of participation up front – for example, explain how long the session will be, the frequency of breaks and the estimated time available for meal breaks.

If there are others in the session in addition to the facilitator(s) and the departing employee, be sure that the others understand that the process should focus on the employee. For example, it is a good idea to explain to the others not to talk during the session. If they have a relevant thought or idea, they should jot it down and present it to the facilitators later. Also, be alert for non-participants who want to provide their own views or attempt to clarify what the employee “meant to say.” The employee should feel that they are being heard and shaping the results.

During a knowledge-capturing process, the facilitator(s) guides the session through some logical structure or sequence. For example, if the goal is to understand what skills are required to perform a job, the facilitators may want to ask employee first to describe the major duties and tasks of the job. Then, using this framework, the facilitator(s) can ask the employee to explain what skills the job requires, given these duties and tasks. Or, suppose the goal is to understand how the employee makes decisions. The facilitator could first have the employee describe the types of decisions they make, then the steps they follow in making each decision, including the information they consider and what they do to ensure success.
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There are several key facilitator activities during a knowledge-capturing session. These are asking questions, documenting, and maintaining session focus.

**Asking questions.** The lead facilitator should ask questions to elicit relevant responses from the employee. Some questions will be as simple as, “And after that, what do you do?” or “What happens next?” or “What do you mean by (jargon or acronym)?” Some questions will involve rephrasing, such as “You said that you get information to see the big picture. What information do you consider?” or “So the steps in the process are… But how do you know when a step is complete?” The questions you ask will depend on the session purpose. Sometimes you will want to draw out what the employee is thinking about when they do something, sometimes what they need to know, where they get information, and so forth.

Keep asking questions until you’re sure you know all the necessary details. Many employees often work without thinking about what they’re doing. It may be difficult to get the employee to articulate all their thoughts.

It is important for the employee to feel that the facilitator(s) grasps most of what they are saying. The act of asking relevant questions as well as rephrasing and documenting their responses will convey your understanding.

**Documenting.** As the employee talks, the facilitator(s) should be documenting. It is best if this is done in such a way that it is visible to everyone in the session. For example, flip charts are ideal for documenting, because everyone can see what is being written, and as one flip chart page is completed, it can be hung on the wall so that it remains visible and can be referred to at anytime.

Documentation often requires more than simply recording what is said. Sometimes a facilitator will need to propose a model that reflects what the employee has been saying. The reason this can be necessary is that the employee may be describing an activity, knowledge, or process that has never before been adequately or formally stated. For example, the facilitator may present a new diagram or list of steps reflecting his/her understanding, and say “Is this an accurate reflection of what you have been saying? What would you change in this diagram to make it more accurate?” One common mistake is for a facilitator to document his/her own rephrasing of an employee’s statement without testing that statement with the employee for accuracy.

**Maintaining session focus.** Throughout a session, the facilitator(s) need to keep the session on track. This means keeping to the planned or emergent structure (e.g., cycling through the steps in a process or tasks in a job). The facilitator(s) needs to recognize if the employee is going off on a tangent and to bring attention back to the subject matter.
Organize Knowledge. After conducting a facilitated knowledge-capturing session, you will need to formally organize and document the information you have obtained. To do this, review all material collected in notes or on flip charts. At this time, it also may be useful to have any other existing documentation on the subject matter available.

The goal of this step is to create a document that reflects, in a structured way, the information you have gathered from the employee. It is important, however, that you provide a value-added service at this point by organizing and presenting the information in a way that makes maximum sense. Often, you can use some kind of categorization to do this. Examples of such categories could be steps in a process or major skills, knowledge, or requirements. Often, it is helpful to have a title for each category, with brief descriptions.

Verify Knowledge. After you have organized the knowledge captured from the employee, you should present it back to the employee for corrections and verification.

For a change to succeed, different people, in different roles, need to exhibit appropriate behaviors. This tool identifies some desired behaviors for people in common roles during a change.