**July 2008**

**Corporate Memory**
**How can we prevent corporate memory loss?**

Wikipedia defines institutional or corporate memory as:

*"… a collective of facts, concepts, experiences and know-how …as it transcends the individual, it requires the ongoing transmission of memories between members of a group. Elements of institutional memory may be found in corporations, professional groups, government bodies…and by extension in entire cultures."*

Conventionally, we call this wisdom.

I began to think about corporate memory this week, as I met with a Chamber member who said that part of her company's problems were caused by a lack of it – the turnover rate in her industry was so high, no one could remember the ramifications of bad decisions made ten years ago – and therefore, the same bad decision was about to be repeated, likely with the same disastrous result. Most companies know that they should have a retention strategy for their employees and even for their information – but what about their company knowledge? With increased rates of turnover, how does a company go about retaining this invaluable wisdom as employees walk out the door?

There are four basic categories of corporate memory: professional, company, individual and project. It is the project and individual memories that are difficult to retain. Most businesses have some sort of orientation process for new employees that shows them where the tools of the job are and how the organization is structured. But what about the little things – like knowing that a key customer prefers to be phoned not emailed, or that in order to win a project from a certain client, proposals must be accompanied with a personal visit? It's this type of knowledge that is often lost and yet, can prove to be most valuable.

Many businesses have recognized the value in corporate memory and have taken steps to retain as much of it as possible. But there are several obstacles to creating a culture where corporate memory is valued. What you want to avoid is creating an information database that no one uses and calling it corporate memory – memories are created by personal knowledge, not static information. To create a lasting corporate memory, focus on creating relationships. According to Knowledge-At-Work, "knowledge flows via relationships, not databases". [1] Relationships require trust in order to flourish and in order to produce the kind of dialogue that will allow memories to flourish.

Some suggested methods for retaining your corporate memories are:

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[1] http://denham.typepad.com/km/2003/09/corporate_memor.html

1. Have regular staff meetings with time for informal dialogue – colleagues will naturally talk about past employees who used creative solutions, or about past projects. This type of dialogue may seem like a waste of time to some – but in fact, it's invaluable.

2. Techniques such as appreciative inquiry or world café can be used to encourage rich dialogue among employees – to learn more, go to http://appreciatevieinquiry.cwru.edu/ and www.theworldcafe.com.

3. Overlap incoming and outgoing employees – employees can teach each other a lot; give outgoing employees an opportunity to share what they know.

Creating and strengthening corporate memory helps to capture expertise, speed learning, record decision rationale and helps us learn from past failures and success.[2]  I suggested to the Chamber member that I was speaking with, that perhaps she should take today's decision makes out for dinner with people who were affected by the decision ten years ago – they might learn something from each other.

**Suggested sources for more information about building corporate memories:**

Brooking, A., 1999. Corporate Memory. Strategies for Knowledge Management. Thompson Business Press

http://denham.typepad.com/km/2006/12/reflecting_on_c.html

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[2] http://denham.typepad.com/km/2003/09/corporate_memor.html