

Capturing, Retaining, and Leveraging Federal Agency Workforce Knowledge

by Bill Kaplan

The federal government is “losing its minds,” but not necessarily in the way one might think from watching the TV news. The federal government employs more than 2.7 million workers and hires hundreds of thousands each year to replace those that transfer to other federal government jobs, retire, or leave for other reasons.

The turnover poses a multidimensional dilemma for federal agencies. When key employees move on or shift roles, the knowledge gap created by their absence generates significant “costs” for the agencies.

Even more troubling is the potential loss of institutional and professional subject matter knowledge. Managers are often unaware of the knowledge their departing workers possess. These gaps in knowledge can fundamentally damage an agency’s ability to accomplish its mission.

Knowledge retention and knowledge loss occur on a continuum—from short-term inability to access knowledge when a subject matter expert is out of the office, to a long-term loss of knowledge due to a worker leaving the organization.

Workforce turnover and knowledge loss is a challenge at both the workforce and leadership levels because there isn’t always a ready supply of skilled and experienced replacements who can easily step into their predecessors shoes. Changing demographics and generational differences that encompass skills, cultural norms, and work expectations further compound losses in productivity, reduced cycle time, and errors. Many of these losses can be avoided with a consistent and disciplined agency approach that supports capturing, adapting, transferring, and reusing the critical and relevant knowledge of the organization.

Government Workforce’s Specific Challenges

The performance risks facing the government from the failure to broadly invest in the mitigation of these knowledge loss risks are significantly different from the private sector. While personnel acquisition cycle rules and timelines are significant challenges, the federal government faces two other noteworthy challenges.

One, compared to the private sector, which focuses

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on performance by necessity, the public sector is driven to focus mostly on compliance. In the private sector, failure to leverage one’s knowledge can lead down a path to competitive disadvantage, poor profits, and possibly being out of business. The government, while it claims to focus on performance, really doesn’t. There is no real profit motive; government organizations are neither profit or loss centers, nor is the leadership broadly held accountable as such.

Two, the private sector is able to focus, budget, and invest for the long term. The federal government is tied to an annual fiscal year budget cycle that actually precludes long-term investment in areas that require a long-term strategy such as knowledge management.

Risk Due to Change

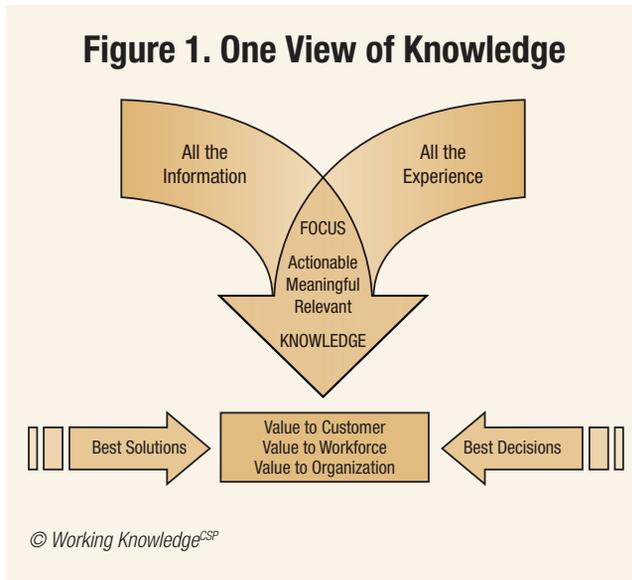
To provide some valuable context, let’s briefly discuss knowledge and risk due to change.

One View of Knowledge in the Government

Consider the view of knowledge in Figure 1. Knowledge comprises “all the information” in an agency and “all the

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Figure 1. One View of Knowledge



experience and insight” in an agency. By leveraging and focusing this knowledge, in context, you not only will be able to improve your individual, team, and agency performance, but also deliver value to your workforce, your constituents or customers, and your agency (mission). When facing challenge or change, this will help to enable your agency to make the best decisions and to develop the best solutions.

Change and Risk

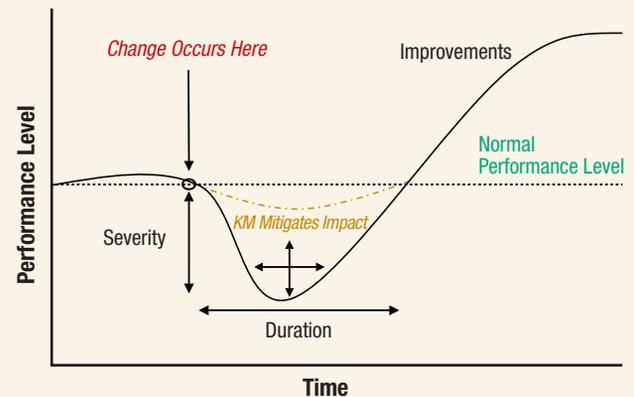
As Figure 2 illustrates, change can have a major impact on an organization’s ability to operate. The kind of change and its severity determines what kind of knowledge is needed and how important that knowledge is to mitigating the impact of change and the critical event on the normal operating performance of the organization.

When the organization faces new or unfamiliar factors that can affect performance, the ability to quickly leverage their core knowledge base will improve the ability to more effectively deal with change, which increases the probability that performance will return to a more normal state more quickly. Based on the level of innovation driven by the decisions made and solutions implemented, the organization may actually exceed previous performance levels because the new knowledge created in addressing this change event enabled improvements that helped the organization plan and execute more effectively.

Why Is This?

Organizations that routinely and consistently capture and retain knowledge about “the know-how and

Figure 2. Change Drives Knowledge Needs



Change Events

1. Changes in leadership
2. Relocation of operations
3. New missions introduced
4. New processes introduced
5. Reallocation of duties
6. Reduction in resources
7. Legal/regulatory changes
8. Workforce turnover– knowledge loss

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know-why” of their operations are much better able to respond quickly to “right the ship.” They can drive a better outcome based on how they have addressed challenges and opportunities in the past. They have enabled the workforce and leadership to “connect, collect, and collaborate” to address these challenges and opportunities.

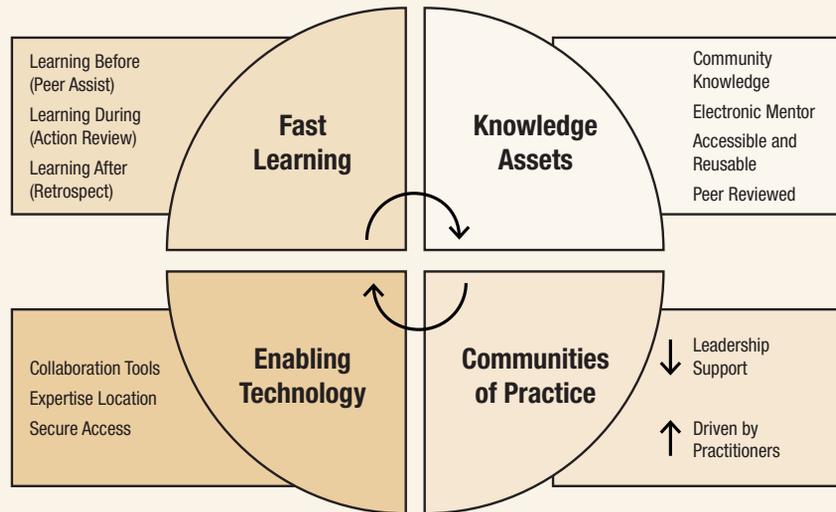
When the organization faces new or unfamiliar situations, the ability to quickly leverage their evolving core knowledge base will enable them to deal with change and increase the probability that performance will return to a “normal” state more quickly. Based on the level of innovation driven by the decisions made and solutions implemented, the organization may actually exceed previous performance levels because the new knowledge created in addressing this change event enabled improvements that helped the organization plan and execute more effectively.

What Can Be Done?

Organizations can develop an effective capture, adapt, transfer, and reuse strategy to reduce the risk associated with workforce turnover and knowledge loss (Figure 3).

- Use “fast learning” processes and methodologies that make learning before, during, and after part of the way work gets done.
- Define communities of practice around core business processes, practices, and other mission-relevant target areas.

Figure 3. KM Framework



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- ♦ Create a core knowledge base (knowledge asset) supported by a defined knowledge architecture (taxonomy) in the context of the organization’s mission and operations, supporting the communities of practice.
- ♦ Enable technology to facilitate connection, collaboration, and sharing.
- ♦ Build a culture that is acceptable to change and view it as part of successful business evolution. Make capturing and reusing knowledge part of the core business processes.

Basics for Success: Capture, Adapt, Transfer, Reuse

Organizations that are successful in sustaining their investment in their ability to successfully capture, adapt, transfer, and reuse “what they know about what they do” understand the following six factors:

1. There is long-term value in capturing and reusing knowledge and how and where it can be applied. It’s about continuously improving performance!
2. It takes long-term commitment to build and sustain a knowledge enabled organization.
3. Knowledge capture and reuse must be a routine part of the way work is accomplished.
4. Start to socialize the value of effective knowledge capture and reuse practices where it will have a significant impact on performance that can be broadly

seen, communicated, and transferred—pick a pilot project to demonstrate the value of this thinking and the supporting practices.

5. Focus on the people and the processes necessary to move knowledge across your workforce—not the technology. It’s about changing behavior!
6. Effective connecting and collaborating behavior generally aligns with the multi-generational nature of the workforce.

To mitigate challenges and risks, government organizations need a consistent, disciplined, and sustainable framework for capturing, adapting, transferring, and reusing their relevant and critical knowledge. It is a fundamental part of a successful succession planning.

It’s about creating a high-performing and knowledge-enabled organization that can effectively deal with and operate “faster than the speed of change,” drive superior, sustainable, and measurable performance, and deliver value to its customers, to its workforce, and to the organization itself.

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