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Best practices, case studies and strategy



David W. DeLong

## **Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce**

Oxford University Press  
September 2004

### ***Review by William Ives***

Thirty-five years ago, NASA put men on the moon for US\$24 billion over a decade. In the ensuing years, not only did NASA forget how to do it, as everyone involved retired and little effort was made to record what they knew, but in a cost cutting move, they lost the last set of blueprints for the only rocket ever built that was big enough to get there. This is a dramatic example of lost knowledge, and unless something is done, the financial impact of the upcoming retirement of baby boomers will be far greater.

David DeLong makes an impressive case for the high cost of losing intellectual capital in his new book *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce*. Thankfully, he follows it with a comprehensive set of chapters on how to design, evaluate and implement an array of knowledge retention strategies.

One of themes DeLong stresses is the need for an integrated, multi-dimensional approach. He provides a four-part knowledge retention strategy framework that includes knowledge recovery initiatives, knowledge transfer practices, IT applications to capture, store and share knowledge, and human resource processes and practices. There are many practical suggestions for each component with robust examples from organizations that have successfully addressed aspects of this looming challenge. Like most KM efforts, meeting the challenge of losing knowledge through retirement is not a one-size-fits-all effort. The conceptual framework in *Lost Knowledge* allows readers to better understand the logic driving each set of examples and customize the initiatives for their own environment.

I especially liked the in-depth coverage of tacit knowledge transfer, a theme that has sometimes been put aside with the rise of big-time content management efforts and the corresponding focus on tangible assets. He covers such soft topics as storytelling with the same concrete guidelines for achieving business value that he provides in the sections on HR and IT. His chapter, "After the Knowledge is Gone," recognizes that, despite all efforts, time takes away some knowledge and he outlines ways to recover lost intellectual assets like an archeologist.

The significant downsizing in some companies as a result of the recent economic turn has provided early glimpses of the cost of lost knowledge. It has also provided an environment for knowledge retention practices to emerge. DeLong offers examples from the nuclear weapons, aerospace, oil and gas, and transportation industries. He concludes the book with a chapter on making knowledge retention an ongoing strategic effort. In the era of knowledge-based economies, this should strike a chord with most senior executives. In this context, he hopes that the next time we go to the moon we won't forget how we got there.

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