



PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

BRIEF

Best Practices for WisDOT Workforce Transition

WisDOT employees along with employees at other public sector transportation agencies are older on average than Wisconsin's workforce as a whole. With the baby boom generation reaching retirement, the loss to WisDOT's workforce, including contractors, is expected to be severe.

What's the Problem?

Much of the expertise held by soon-to-leave workers is not captured by documentation, and procedures for transferring information from retiring to newer workers are often inadequate and not standardized across WisDOT divisions. WisDOT managers needed to understand the strategies available for easing workforce transitions and retaining knowledge held by departing workers and to utilize these strategies in developing products and procedures for capturing and organizing this knowledge, ultimately leading to better informed WisDOT decision making and program management.

Research Objectives

The goal of this study was to meet this need by collecting best practices in knowledge management and workforce transition, and using these methods to create pilot products for WisDOT's Bureau of Transit, Local Roads, Railroads and Harbors, and a handbook for all of WisDOT.

Methodology

Investigators performed a literature search on knowledge retention and also interviewed key WisDOT staff. With the information gathered, they developed the WisDOT Guidebook for Knowledge Management. Specific products were created for the Railroads and Harbors Section to serve as a pilot implementation, including narrated PowerPoint presentations to help experienced employees train newer ones (storytelling), a training plan for a key position, process matrices for several other positions and a knowledge repository designed to serve most of the section.

In November 2010, this guide was used to conduct a workshop that included 35 WisDOT managers. At the end of this event, workshop participants were asked to complete a short survey about the usefulness of the information presented. Survey respondents were then interviewed six months later to determine what steps they had taken to implement these workforce transition strategies.

Results

The guidebook provides step-by-step instructions for developing knowledge retention strategies based on the types of knowledge to be retained and organizational factors. It provides managers with a menu of 24 options for knowledge retention and management, including:

- Documenting processes, creating annotated document templates and information repositories, and videotaping employees on the job
- Analyzing current practices and relationships to make them easier to document and convey to newer staff
- Increasing information sharing among current employees by creating communities of practice, mentoring relationships, "share fairs," storytelling, job rotation among employees, group discussions to review past actions and training
- Communicating with outgoing staff, such as a "last lecture," exit interviews or "expert interviews," to capture outgoing employees' tacit knowledge
- Maintaining communications with retired staff or encouraging phased retirement or double-filling positions to allow outgoing employees to train newer ones

Investigator



"With so many people leaving, we're losing literally thousands of years of experience and organizational knowledge. To attempt to retain some of that knowledge is absolutely critical."

—Ernie Wittwer
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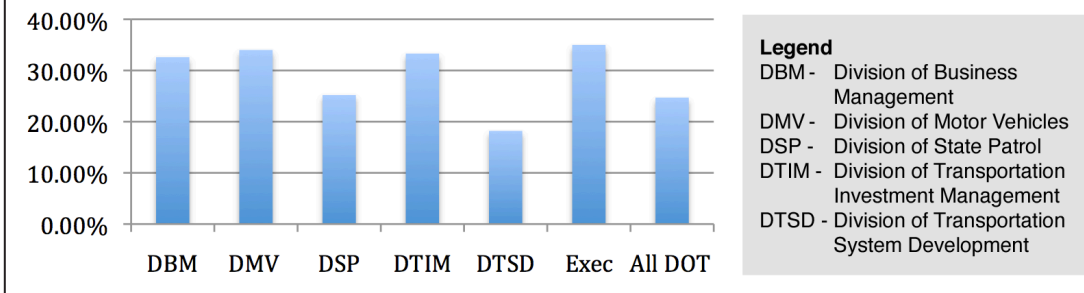
— Ron Adams
WisDOT Bureau
of Railroads and
Harbors

“We were pleased with the development and implementation of this study and look forward to using the tools to assist divisions in managing the knowledge we are at risk of losing in the future.”

— Randy Sarver
WisDOT Human
Resources Director
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Eligible for Retirement By 2015



Levels of employees eligible for retirement in WisDOT's divisions are typical for state transportation agencies nationwide. Employees are eligible for retirement if they meet one of the following criteria: For protective service employees (sworn law enforcement officers): a) Age 53 plus 25 years of seniority or b) Age 55. For non-protective occupations: a) Age 57 plus 30 years of seniority or b) Age 65.

The tools developed for Railroads and Harbors were well-received, and were used as illustrations in the guidebook and presented at the workshop. The workshop survey revealed that respondents found the information useful. There was wide agreement on the utility of mentoring and on-the-job training, and most respondents approved of process documentation, cross training and expert interviews; about 30 percent of respondents viewed options like videotaping, storytelling and share fairs favorably.

Ten of the 15 survey respondents provided contact information and were interviewed six months later. These individuals, representing all five WisDOT divisions, provided insight into the knowledge retention methods in use, some of which were triggered by the seminar and others which had been in place for years. Active tools include information repositories, process documentation, training by retirees, double-filling positions, cross training, on-the-job training and peer group establishment. The report provides details on the tools and methods employed to enact these measures.

Implementation and Benefits

The information about current practices gained through this study provides a baseline for determining the extent to which workforce transition measures are implemented over the coming years. Ongoing monitoring is required to determine which types of measures prove most effective.

The project report describes the enormity of the challenge WisDOT is facing and recommends several relatively low-cost steps to address the challenge:

- Provide ongoing training for managers in techniques for knowledge retention
- Create a department-wide repository of key information available to all WisDOT employees
- Encourage each division to engage in strategic planning related to knowledge management
- Make internal consultants available to assist managers in these efforts
- Define criteria for consistently identifying critical positions for knowledge management efforts

Some WisDOT divisions such as the Division of Motor Vehicles have already adopted the tools generated from this report to address immediate needs. The Bureau of Human Resource Services has begun meeting with division leaders to further pilot some of the recommendations in this report. BHRS will monitor the divisions' progress and implement knowledge management processes as part of its regular human resource partnerships with these divisions.

This brief summarizes Project 0092-10-15, “Best Practices in Guidance for Workforce Transition and Succession Planning,” produced through the Wisconsin Department of Transportation Research Program, P.O. Box 7915, Madison, WI 53707.

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