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Sustained Competitive Advantage Through Structured Mentoring

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Abstract

“Knowledge is like money. To be of value, it must circulate, and in circulation it can increase in quantity and, hopefully in value.” (Louis L’Amour).

Sustained success and steady growth require organizations to develop and retain a core of culture, relationships and critical knowledge and skills. Capitalizing on the strengths of several disciplines such as competency-based training, knowledge management, and structured mentoring programs, organizations can reach these goals and offer their employees opportunities for professional development and career advancement that would not otherwise be possible. In this paper, we discuss an approach to structured mentoring aimed at the effective and reliable transfer of corporate culture, relationships, and knowledge. We identify key practices and tools and share lessons learned from experience.

Knowledge Transfer in the Oil & Gas Sector

Within every organization there is a vast body of skills, knowledge, memories, relationships, and experience that are critical to performance, safety of operations, even to survival¹. People are the “carriers” of this vital knowledge. Most of it remains tacit and will never be written down². As an intangible asset, knowledge tends to be poorly mapped and inadequately catalogued. Making knowledge explicit on a “just in case” basis, is not economically feasible.³ As we know, outlining the steps for riding a bicycle is of little help in transferring that skill.

Transferring business-critical knowledge and skills is on the “to do” list of most organizations. In the Oil & Gas sector, the convergence of three major trends creates a sense of urgency. First, we are responding to steep growth by hiring and fielding large numbers of new employees. At the same time, we are being forced to rotate the more experienced employees to cover higher-priority positions. Finally, we must prepare for

the departure of substantial numbers of our most experienced workers as part of the so-called “big crew change”⁴. The combined impact of these trends leads to increased strain and negatively impacts safety and performance. We respond by investing in training, knowledge management, personnel development, coaching or mentoring programs, but we understand that there are no silver bullets.

Competency models and knowledge mapping allow us to identify high-priority areas of critical expertise that need to be transferred and honed. However, the transfer of complex knowledge and skills is difficult and time consuming. Knowledge is “sticky” and does not flow freely. Skills take time to develop, and those who have mastered critical knowledge and skills, tend to be few in number and their time is very valuable.

Structured Mentoring Programs and Mentorships

Through experience, we have combined the strengths of several of our classic tools and developed a practical solution for timely and effective knowledge transfer. Blending proven practices from competency modeling, instructional systems design, knowledge management, coaching and mentoring, we have evolved a practical, repeatable methodology for the design, development, and implementation of structured mentoring programs.

Competency-Based Training. Similar to competency-based training, structured mentoring programs adhere to the Instructional Systems Design (ISD) process and focus on the development of critical core competencies. Geared towards the realization of clear goals and objectives, both competency-based training and structured mentoring enable organizations to measure and track learning outcomes.

However, two important differences distinguish structured mentoring from competency-based training.

- While training is primarily conducted away from the job and out of context, structured mentoring is implemented in-context and right on-the-job.
- Structured mentorships are individualized and customized to meet specific professional objectives, build business-critical core competencies², accommodate personal interests, develop corporate and political know-how, build knowledge networks, and enable employees to form strategic alliances – all of which would not be possible in more traditional instructional settings¹.