Remote Working – Management of Tacit (Implicit) Knowledge and Learning

Knowledge management owes its inspiration to the work of the philosopher Michael Polanyi and the Japanese organization learning 'guru' Ikijuro Nonaka who argued that knowledge has two forms – explicit and tacit; tacit (implicit) knowledge occurring in the form of subjective insight, intuition, judgement, inspiration or innovation. In short it is the knowledge and skills gained in the workplace, in an unstructured way, that is often passed on to others through people collaborating in the workplace or by employees listening and watching what is going on around them; but it is rarely captured and managed. Drucker contended that knowledge management would have a major impact on the structure of future organizations. However, it would appear that, with remote working, the structure of the organization is going to have an impact on how knowledge and learning is managed.

John Harvey-Jones once said that if industry is not changing then it is dying and this is pertinent to all organisations. This would infer that change is constant and therefore implicit knowledge will be accumulated on a daily basis. Knowledge management is therefore crucial in the development of both the employee and the organisation but remote working has brought about a number of 'difficulties' with regard to the communication, capture and utilisation of tacit knowledge. This article attempts to find solutions to the problems explicit to transforming implicit learning into explicit knowledge (knowledge that can be easily found and utilised across the organisation). In the first instance the leadership needs to 'instal' a platform from which to work. This means that they need to have an in-depth understanding of the systems, processes and interactions that currently support the Value Chain, many of which will have undergone change through the utilisation of implicit knowledge in the past.

The most obvious way in which to gain an understanding of current working practices and to be in a position to identify inter-departmental interactions is to undertake a Quality Continuous Improvement event. Whilst this might seem time-consuming, if linked to the Value Chain (working back from the Customer) it can be invaluable in identifying any distortion that may have occurred over time, thereby providing an opportunity to 'iron out the kinks' prior to putting a system in place to capture and communicate future learning. It will also help to provide an understanding of how implicit learning can be managed in the future but, of course, management of data also relies on business leaders leveraging a learning culture.

If employees have an understanding of the Value Chain, the Inter-Departmental interactions that support it and of how they can add value though their day-to-day work, then this should provide them with an insight into how their implicit learning can impact organisational development. Staff should be encouraged to share learning outcomes and, through innovation and creativity, offer insights into how these might add value. There is also a need for employees to highlight the context in which the learning occurred. If knowledge is used in the 'right' context it can lead to competitive advantage; but in the 'wrong' context it could well have a detrimental effect across the organisation. One way in which to consolidate learning might be to hold 'development days' – perhaps in a social setting – where people might be encouraged to elaborate on what was learned, how the learning came about and why it is seen as important enough to share. It is important to remember that, where change is made in one area, there can be a 'knock-on' effect in other areas and so development days would need to be inter-departmental if the learning is to take full effect.

When looking at the development of newly-appointed staff, employers may wish to put in place a programme of mentoring. A decision would then need to be made as to whether the mentor and mentee should come into a set workplace or, perhaps, meet up at a location convenient to both in order to work. We are constantly reminded that, in some cases, people can work from any location

and so the latter is a possible alternative working practice where mentoring is required. However, this does not explain how implicit knowledge should be captured and managed.

Looking across the internet I am seeing a great many software options that can be utilised to capture implicit learning. For instance, Groupware allows group members to communicate clearly with each other, to coordinate their work and to collaborate in the sharing of information. I am not going to suggest the use of any particular software as different organisations are likely to have different needs. It might even be more advantageous to purchase bespoke software; designed to meet specific requirements in knowledge transfer. All I would say is that, whatever software you might use, it will need to be agile enough to capture learning (including the context in which it was learned), organise the learning so that a search methodology can be utilised by everyone, distribute learning data across the organisation (and highlight any new data or changes to data), reuse and react to data (perhaps to be able to ask questions of the original learner and to be able to measure the relevance of data – is it outdated?) and update data at a later stage. This does mean that, as part of the learning culture, employees should be encouraged to look out for new, or changes to, data that have been highlighted by the 'Information Manager'. Looking at the problems that I found in my original research, that just leaves the management of information that has become available through implicit learning.

In addition to ensuring that everyone is 'singing from the same song sheet', there is a need for a decision to be made as to whether the implicit knowledge, gained by employees, will require a review of the strategies and capabilities being leveraged by the employer. This means that the data that has been captured will need to be managed by someone who has a thorough knowledge of the business at both a strategic and operational level. If the organisation employs a Learning & Development (L&D) professional then, it would appear that, the management of such data might sit squarely in their court, but do they have the business expertise required? If not, then this may be a new learning curve for them. However, in some organisations, especially smaller organisations, it may be that a L&D professional is not employed – in which case someone, with sufficient knowledge of the business, will need to take on this responsibility. In short, what relevance does this information hold for the organisation? Is it being shared with the 'right' people? Is it being updated?

That now concludes the initial research by Specialist Human Resources Limited into managing implicit learning and knowledge in the context of remote working. I say initially because I have no doubt other people will have ideas from which we can learn more in this area of expertise and we would welcome their views (or even constructive criticism of our research). However, one thing is for sure, it is a subject that, if ignored, could lead to a stagnation of both employee and organisational development; leading to a high turnover of staff (together with the loss of tacit knowledge) due to employee expectations in professional development not being met and to a loss of competitive advantage for the organisation due to the stagnation of business growth.