

Here's What Isn't Making it to Digital

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What isn't making it to digital is an important question you should know and care about in order to sustain your business.

Transitions are important times in an organization's life cycle, and not all transitions are planned. Deaths, terminations, extended illnesses and new owners can arise unexpectedly. Those remaining on the scene can find themselves under pressure to find information that, had there been robust systems in place, would surely have been easy to find. Or would it? Tribal knowledge is not institutional knowledge.

The institutional knowledge is recoverable, easily findable, indexed, filed and backed up as part of the organization's quality and management operating systems. However, there are classes of knowledge that are not formal, often not documented, and if documented, not stored in an easily retrievable means. What knowledge in your organization qualifies as tribal, rather than institutional knowledge? Here are five suggestions to start your thinking.

Craft Practices

A craft practice is a way of doing something developed by a practitioner over time that evolves into the best way to perform a task. Yes, everyone has to demonstrate that they can properly regrind a drill before they get to move up a grade. Yet, there is one person who, when the job is a real difficult runner, everyone seeks with their drill to have it sharpened "that guy's way." The standard work instructions might say to do "x," but the instructions somehow leave out, "and then snug it with an extra quarter turn, or drag the insert across the bench and then wipe," or "how to consistently get the preload right." Craft practices add value every day, and they are not captured in electronic records.

Institutional Values

Recently, we were treated to a company that had rediscovered its founder's vision. That vision, it turned out, was extremely helpful to the new generation as it tried to adjust its approach to this current time and market. Where is your company's founding notes, strategies, plans and records? Are they retrievable? Readable (who can read longhand script writing in your youngest cohort)? These kinds of things can truly be the equivalent of the family jewels in a change of control situation. Who is keeper of the traditional values of the founder's culture?

Domain Knowledge

Every shop, every shift has that one authority that you can ask that remembers, "The last time we ran that material, we ground extra hook into the tool because it ran easy to cut," or a hundred other details. Some of that knowledge is in their head. Some of it is in their notebook of lessons learned or "apprentice notes" they keep updating. Who are your



domain masters? They may not be able to show you written records of all they know, but that knowledge leaves when they do if you don't find a way to share.

Unwritten Policies

Unwritten policies may be in your company, or they may be those of your supplier, and you had no idea. For example, as a steel supplier, I had an internal policy regarding both grain size and sulfur content that my plants applied to our hot rolled steel purchases. The customer did not know that when they ordered from us, we had already optimized our spec for machining. However, when they went to another supplier for the same item, if that supplier was not ordering as we did, the folks in the shop had issues to solve as chips went from short pieces into tangled nests, and tool failure rates increased substantially due to edge wear or BUE. Someone on your team should be looking at incoming material certs to find out what is there in front of you, but that you don't know. Proprietary coatings that are coyly called standard, may be such an unwritten factor to your shop's success.

Data

What is the normal expectancy for (fill in the blank)? In the old days, somebody knew. And they knew it in relation to the specific supplier, material, tool or application. Today, everyone thinks Google and YouTube have the answers. In many cases, they can show you cool stuff, but actual intelligence and inferences about your situation are nowhere to be found. Who is the hoarder of all of your past sales brochures? Pamphlets? Spec sheets? Giveaways?

PMPA members call me regularly because they know we have the secrets that never made it to digital. Old handbooks, data tables and decades of industry experience. That doesn't get digitized easily.

But the challenge is there. It is up to us to solve it. We like to think that we are living in a modern age of digital connection and enlightenment. The question is, will our grandchildren think we were the ones who "lost all of the knowledge" when all the print materials disappear? Will they think of us as the anonymous souls of the last dark age?