

Planning for the Brain Drain

The invitations to the retirement parties seem to be arriving at a more rapid rate these days. Many of the people who brought information technology to higher education are moving on to enjoy the next stage of life after years of leading and managing IT on campus. A good number of these recent or soon-to-be retirees are the people who helped create the “campus computer center,” who introduced the world to personal computers and networks, and who led the development of some of today’s standard technologies. They are the people who put IT on the campus map and who helped presidents, provosts, and other campus executives understand the strategic role that IT can play. They are the people who built the foundation for the relatively young profession of higher education IT.

Yet while we are wishing them well and toasting their futures, some of us in the profession are quietly worrying about something that is leaving campus along with these retirees. This “something” is an incredible amount of institutional and professional knowledge and history. In 2005, Accenture published results of a survey of more than five hundred U.S. workers between the ages of forty and fifty. When asked if their companies had a formal workforce planning process in place to capture what they know, almost half of the respondents reported that their companies had none.¹ If we asked the same question of our higher education colleagues, would we fare as well? What are we doing to anticipate these vacancies and capture

the information and the knowledge that is “walking out the door”?

Spending time in planning and preparation can lessen the impact of anticipated departures and can help institutions thoughtfully harvest some of the technical knowledge and important experience of employees. Now is the time to figure out where an institution is most at risk. If institutional leaders can identify who is likely to leave and when, they can develop strategies accordingly.

The timeline will dictate strategies and tactics. If the network director is about to head out the door and limited time allows for only a “core dump,” then knowledge management (KM) techniques can assist in the process of capturing explicit and tacit knowledge and recording, archiving, and organizing the data so that it can be accessible to others. A longer-term strategy combines knowledge capture with a little social engineering and planned mentoring: using mentoring or coaching relationships to deliberately pair retiring staff with those who are earlier in their careers can serve the dual purposes of knowledge transfer and career development.

Other creative “transition techniques” can make the move to retirement a little easier, for both the institution and the individual. In some cases, a phased retirement may make sense: the individual’s level of involvement on campus is reduced gradually over time. This idea appeals to many soon-to-be retirees who don’t want to go “cold turkey,” and it gives the institution an opportunity to focus on knowledge transfer during this period of *dénouement*.

In other situations, an apprenticeship between the future retiree and his or her planned successor may offer benefits in the form of a trial period for the newcomer with the assurance that the experienced professional is still at the helm (or at least close to it). Although this strategy is not without its challenges and raises numerous questions (Who is really in charge? What if the planned successor doesn’t work out?), it has succeeded on several campuses.

On the other hand, if the IT expert heads out the door and on to the next big adventure before any of these tactics or strategies can be implemented, then the institution might want to take a look at recently retired IT professionals to help fill its knowledge gaps or to supplement remaining staff. My suspicion is that there is and will continue to be a cadre of highly knowledgeable individuals, with a wealth of experience, who will be willing to consult with institutions on both short- and longer-term projects.

With the large number of higher education IT retirements looming in the not-too-distant future, campuses must have plans in place for the transfer of knowledge, and it is never too early to start to put those plans into motion. The party invitations are arriving.

Note

1. “As U.S. Workforce Ages, Employee Knowledge and Experience at Risk, Accenture Survey Finds,” May 10, 2005, <http://accenture.tekgroup.com/article_display.cfm?article_id=4214>.

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