Managing Knowledge in Small Non-profit Organizations

A Toolkit and Research Report

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Acknowledgements

This toolkit and report are the products of the study,
Examining the risk of lost knowledge due to personnel changes in small non-profit organizations on Prince Edward Island.

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Introduction

Knowledge management is concerned with how knowledge is generated, stored, transferred and analysed. With a projected retirement boom and shortages of skilled personnel, organizations will have to develop effective ways to manage their knowledge, or risk losing the wisdom and experience of their veteran personnel when they retire, putting the organization's sustainability at risk.

This risk may be especially significant for small non-profit organizations, because they may already face challenges associated with small numbers of employees, limited resources and restrictions tied to how they are funded.

This report contains the Knowledge Management Toolkit that emerged from the findings of the study, *Examining the risks of lost knowledge in small non-profit organizations on Prince Edward Island*. This report also offers a summary of that study.

Its key findings were that small non-profits may benefit from knowledge management tools which can be customized to meet their particular needs in their environment of limited resources and competing priorities, and that creating and maintaining strong personal bonds which transcend work relationships, can reduce the risk of valuable knowledge lost through staff attrition.

The toolkit was developed upon three premises:

- Knowledge can be managed effectively through numerous small efforts over an extended period.
- Knowledge management should contribute to work processes and organizational goals.
- People are the key to managing knowledge.

This project strives to assist small non-profits — a sector largely neglected in knowledge management research — in finding ways to lessen the risk of losing their organization's knowledge due to staff turnover and thereby increase their ability to be more sustainable, and valuable.

About this Toolkit

This toolkit was developed for small non-profit organizations to help reduce the risk of lost knowledge due to staff turnover. It is based on the findings for the study, *Examining the risks of lost knowledge in small non-profit organizations on Prince Edward Island*, as well as a review of knowledge management research and its best practices. This toolkit recognizes that knowledge management requires a long-term approach and that there is no cookie cutter solution to the challenges faced by small non-profits. What may work for one, may not work for another. As a result, this toolkit is a multi-dimensional menu of tools which can be used by each organization according to its needs.

DeLong (2004) suggests five considerations when developing effective knowledge management practices, which were used to develop this toolkit.

First, the practice should be valuable for both the present and future of the organization.

Second, staff must be motivated to share and retain knowledge.

Third, the practices that are used must be a good fit for the organization's needs and resources.

Fourth, the knowledge management practices used should capture history in a way that will be relevant to future activities.

And finally, the tools developed must take into account any barriers that exist, in order to offer realistic solutions that can be put to use.

Based on the risks identified in the study and the suggestions of the study participants, the Knowledge Management Toolkit features tools which:

- create opportunities to transfer explicit and tacit knowledge, and to ask questions;
- describe ways to document information which are comprehensive, flexible and reflective of individuals' knowledge;
- outline training methods that involve face-to-face interaction and independent learning;
- contribute to social capital, though the development and maintenance of networks, the sharing of knowledge, and the articulation of vision and values;
- describe tips for effective filing systems and documentation.

How to use the Toolkit

The Toolkit contains templates, tip sheets, guidelines and checklists that address explicit and tacit knowledge as well as personal and impersonal ways of transferring knowledge.

The Toolkit should be considered as a menu of knowledge management options, and each tool can be used as a standalone item, or be combined with other tools.

The Toolkit is a starting point for organizations to develop their own knowledge management strategies, and covers the following main topics:

- Identifying risks
- Overcoming barriers
- Knowledge retention tools
- Knowledge transfer tools
- Succession tools
- Building social capital

The tools are intended to be customized based on the individual's and the organization's needs, and are merely suggested approaches on a variety of knowledge management topics. Users should not feel confined to the format provided, and are encouraged to modify and share.

IDENTIFYING THE RISKS OF LOST KNOWLEDGE

What are the risks of lost knowledge?

The risks associated with lost knowledge due to staff turnover are specific to each organization and the contexts in which they operate.

Why is it important for small non-profits to identify the risks of lost knowledge?

In order to lessen the risk of lost knowledge, it is important to first identify which types of knowledge are at risk. Small non-profits may face unique challenges because of the small number of people in their organization, the unique services that they provide and the limited resources available to them.

Questions to help identify the knowledge at risk associated with turnover

How many people are involved in management or operations of the organization?

Do these people have unique organizational knowledge that is not known to others?

Do these people have critical knowledge about…

- the way the organization operates now?
- the future vision and plans for the organization?

Are these people likely to leave the organization (retirement, other opportunities, etc)…

- in the next year?
- in the next five years?

Are any of the following in place?

- a succession plan?
- an exit strategy?
- an emergency executive succession plan?

Does the organization typically maintain contact with previous staff?

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Questions to help identify the knowledge at risk associated with culture and practices

Does the organization have a knowledge sharing culture?

- Are there opportunities to ask questions, tell stories and share experiences?
- Is documentation and knowledge sharing a part of the work process or is it considered an extra task?
- Are staff and Board aware of the formal networks in which the organization is involved?

How about the informal networks and connections?

Is the organization's documentation …

- complete and comprehensive?
- accessible to all those who need or could benefit from the knowledge?
- easy to understand?
- up to date?

OVERCOMING BARRIERS – *TIP SHEET*

Why is it important to recognize the barriers to knowledge management?

It is important for small non-profits to recognize these barriers in order to develop realistic, resourceful initiatives to overcome them, and be successful within their day-to-day operation.

Barrier	***Tactics to overcome these barriers***
Lack of time	• Acknowledge time pressures and be realistic about what can be achieved to manage knowledge. • Make knowledge management a part of the work flow.
Limited resources	• Identify priorities for the retention and transfer of critical knowledge. • Consider the value of low-tech solutions.
Competing priorities	• Find ways to retain and transfer the knowledge that emerges from the organization's priorities.
Organizational culture does not support knowledge sharing	• Develop policies and a working environment that supports knowledge sharing. • Integrate knowledge management into the strategic goals of the organization.
Limited perceived benefits	• Consider the future of the organization and the knowledge that will be required for sustainability. • Envision the potential consequences if knowledge is lost.
Project funding parameters	• Build upon funders' requirements for reporting to help document meaningful knowledge. • Consider using project evaluations to retain project knowledge.

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The nature of knowledge	• Identify knowledge that can and should be documented. • Create formal and informal opportunities to share wisdom. • Recognize that not all knowledge needs to be retained.
No historic need for succession planning	• Recognize that there is a projected workforce shortage in the near future, which will force non-profits to compete with other organizations for skilled staff.
Fear that knowledge sharing will reduce power	• Create opportunities to build trust within the organization and with external networks. • Reduce hierarchy. • Embed knowledge sharing in the goals and values of the organization.
Size of the organization	• Capitalize on small size by using the opportunities for cross-pollination of knowledge

Adapted from:

Riege, A. (2005; 2007).

What are the organization's mission and values?

An organization's mission and values describe its purpose for existence and the principles by which the organization operates.

Why is it important for small non-profits to articulate their mission and values?

In small organizations, the mission and values are sometimes not stated, because there is no perceived need to do so. Instead, mission and values become assumptions that are shared by a small, tightly-knit group of people working toward common goals. By articulating the mission and values, knowledge of what is important to the organization is stated clearly, and can be more easily recorded and communicated for posterity.

How to develop a mission statement

- A mission statement describes an organization's purpose.
- A mission statement guides the organization's direction and intentions.
- To create a mission statement…
    - Identify the overall purpose of the organization.
    - Identify the key measures of success in achieving the stated purpose.
    - Craft a concise statement that reflects the purpose, measures and results.

How to develop values statements

- Values are the principles which are the foundation for all the activities of the organization and which guide the organization's priorities.
- Values are reflective of staff, membership and the community served.
- To develop a values statement…
    - Consider 4-6 concepts which should underpin all organizational activities.
    - Collaborate with members of the organization in the discussion.
    - Ask the questions:
        - What are the standards for the organization?
        - How should the operations be conducted?
        - How does the organization want to treat its stakeholders?
    - Select values that will motivate excellence in achieving the organization's mission.

Adapted from: Allison, M. & Kayne, J. (2005).

DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES – *TEMPLATE*

What are organizational roles?

Organizational roles define the key players in the organization and their responsibilities, areas of influence, and decision-making authority.

Why are defined roles important for small non-profit organizations?

Defining organizational roles identifies the people within the organization and how they work with each. Role definitions can be helpful when hiring, orienting and training new staff. They can also be useful in mapping knowledge and managing organizational workload and responsibilities, in times of change.

Template for Description of Organizational Roles

Position	Name	Responsibilities	Level of authority
Board			
Staff			
External Contacts			

Organizational Chart

Roles and relationships can also be described graphically using organizations charts (see the example to the right). For small non-profits, the same person may occupy numerous roles on the chart.

Source: Hurwit & Associates (2009).

FUNCTIONAL JOB DESCRIPTION – *TEMPLATE*

What is a functional job description?

A functional job description describes the unique responsibilities and duties of a position. It is an evolving document that changes with the organization's goals and priorities.

Why are functional job descriptions important to small non-profit organizations?

A functional job description is one way to document the contributions of staff, and to describe the way in which a position functions. In small organizations with a limited number of staff, the functional job description can be an opportunity to share document knowledge about the organization's operations.

Template for functional job description

Summary of position		
Reporting relationships		
Description of responsibilities		Percentage of time spent on task:
Daily tasks (unique to the position)		

(continued on page 14)

Ongoing projects		
Future plans	In the next year…	
	In the next five years…	
Key contacts		
Date for review of functional job description:		

Adapted from: University of Rochester, Human Resources Department. (2005).

PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS – *TEMPLATE*

What is a program description?

A program description describes a defined body of work that an organization carries out. The description can include the goals, activities, progress, timelines and key players.

Why are program descriptions important for small non-profit organizations?

A program description can be a useful tool for small non-profits in organizing and recording the work that is done, and can be a valuable timesaver in training new staff.

Program Description Template

Program Name:	
Purpose:	
Activities:	
Community:	
Program goals:	
Personnel involved in…	
Program development:	
Implementation:	
Funder:	
Timeline…	
Start date:	
Milestones:	
End date:	
Evaluation:	
Future plans:	

Knowledge Management Tool for Non-profit Organizations

EFFECTIVE DOCUMENTATION – *TIP SHEET*

What types of knowledge can be captured in organizational documentation?

Not all knowledge can, or should, be documented. Organizational knowledge that lends itself well to documentation is explicit, rules-based knowledge that can be codified. As well, remember that documentation is only one component of knowledge management.

Why is effective documentation important for small non-profit organizations?

Effective documentation helps to organize work and to record history. It is particularly important during transition of personnel and programs.

Tips for effective documentation

- Examine your current documentation practices.
  - What works well? Where is there room for improvement?
  - What have been the organizational consequences of ineffective documentation?
- Documentation should emerge from business needs.
  - Prioritize the types of knowledge that should be documented and address high priority items first.
  - For lower priority items, create a list of documentation that can be completed if time/resources permit in the future.
  - Regularly review documentation and purge obsolete information.
- Effective documentation should be a reasonable part of the work process.
  - Leverage activities that are already a part of operations. For example…
    - Include a narrative account along with the subjective information in funder reports.
    - Consider documenting personal visions and future plans for the organization as part of performance review activities.
    - In e-mails, add context and rationale for decisions made.
    - Retain these documents in the organization's files.
- Effective documentation should contribute to efficiencies in the future.
  - Document to communicate decisions and actions.
  - Develop minute-taking practices that expand on annotated agenda items.
  - Make documentation a part of the work flow.
  - Create catalogues of speeches, work plans and report templates.

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- Keep an organizational timeline of regular activities and events.
- Create a shared calendar for organization staff.
- Document issues that may have an impact on the organization's future activities. Provide background information and a description of how issue was resolved.

- When documenting, consider the audience.
  - Use language that will be understood by your audience and avoid unfamiliar jargon.
  - Is the documentation accessible to those who need it? Would the use of alternate media (e.g. Video) contribute positively to accessibility and usability?

KNOWLEDGE EXIT STRATEGY – *GUIDELINES*

What is an exit strategy?

An exit strategy is a risk management tool that lays out a planned transition when a staff member is leaving, as in the case of retirement, for example. Typically a component of a business or career plan, an exit strategy can ensure that the critical knowledge of the person leaving is retained within the organization. An exit strategy can be developed by the outgoing person, or it can be used as the basis of an exit interview.

Why is it important for small non-profit personnel to develop an exit strategy?

Small non-profits face unique challenges around knowledge management, because of the small number of people involved in the organization, the unique services that they provide and the limited resources they have to provide them. An exit strategy is one way to reduce the risk of knowledge being lost when key personnel leave.

Questions to assist in the development of a Knowledge Exit Strategy

- When do you plan to leave the organization?
- Has a successor been identified?
- Do you have an emergency succession plan?
- Has an emergency replacement been identified?
- How do you plan to pass along your knowledge of the organization?
- Is there an updated job description on file?
- Is there anyone else in your organization who knows how to do your job?
- What needs to be done on a daily basis, to keep the organization operating?
- What activities/tasks need to be completed within 3 months of your departure? Within 6 months? Within one year?
- What projects will be in progress when you leave? Who are the other people working on these projects?
- Who are your key contacts?
- What are the most important things that you know about the organization?
- What is the most important part of your role?
- What are the most important skills that are required for your job?

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- What have been your greatest challenges?
- Where do you see the organization in the next five years?
- What challenges do you foresee for the organization?
- What opportunities exist?
- What are your personal goals for the organization?
- Will you continue to be involved in the organization after your departure?
- Will you be part of the training process for your successor?
- Will you be available to answer questions about the organization after your departure?

Adapted from: Federation of Community Organizations & Non-Profit Sector Leadership Program. (2008).

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EFFECTIVE FILING SYSTEMS – *TIP SHEET*

What are the characteristics of effective filing systems?

Effective filing systems are those which are well-planned, complete, accessible and up to date. They are organized in a way that allows for logical storage and easy retrieval of information.

Why is it important for small non-profits to maintain effective files?

Effective filing systems can help retain knowledge, save time and organizational memory. In resource-limited small non-profits, they can have a significant impact on operating more efficiently.

Tips for developing effective filing systems

- Consider which files should be accessible and which files must be secure.
- Store files in a location and format that is accessible, whether in an electronic or hard copy format.
- Use media that is suited to the knowledge being stored. Files may be electronic, hard copy or a combination.
- Use meaningful key words and dates when naming files, and apply the method consistently.
- Organize files intuitively, with meaningful folders and subfolders.
- Take advantage of the functionality of the technology that is available — e.g., electronic searches, shared document storage, and networks.
- Hard copy file drawers should be indexed and be no more than 90% full to allow for easy retrieval.
- Use a system that records when files are in use and by whom.
- Perform regular back-ups and consider storage of back-ups off site.
- Do not maintain duplicates of the same file, and ensure that previous or draft versions are identified accordingly.
- Regularly purge or archive files that are incomplete, obsolete or rarely used, except files that are historically significant. Technology can be of assistance in this task, by using search functions to look up documents by last opened and last revised dates.

DEVELOPING A MENTORING PROGRAM – *GUIDELINES*

What is a mentoring program?

A mentoring program involves a more experienced person transferring the information he or she knows to another person, through open dialogue.

How can a mentoring program benefit a small non-profit organization?

Small non-profits may not have resources to develop formal training programs, or to have an overlap period between outgoing and incoming staff. Mentoring programs create the opportunity for knowledge to be transferred face-to-face, and can address questions and situations that help staff share values, wisdom and experience.

Mentoring Program Guidelines

- Mentorship does not have to be a formal program, but should be supported at the organizational level and by those who are involved in the mentorship.
- Organizational culture must be supportive of learning.
    - The learner must have ample opportunity to try out new skills, to make mistakes, to ask questions and to receive feedback.
- Consider who should be involved in the mentoring program. Outgoing staff may play a valuable role in identifying learning objectives and identifying possible mentors.
    - There can be more than one mentor for different learning objectives.
- Participation should be voluntary – not everyone is prepared to take on the mentor role, and not everyone learns best in this environment.
- At the outset, identify the mentorship partners, clarify roles, state expectations and determine the learning objectives.
- Determine how the mentoring program will achieve closure.
- Partners should be in agreement about the goals and objectives of the program.
- Regular checkpoints should be established to monitor progress related to the goals and objectives.
- Mentoring programs need not only target new personnel. A mentorship can develop in any situation where one person has knowledge to pass along to another.
- Evaluate the mentoring program throughout its duration and consider an *After Action Review* at closure.

***Adapted from**:* International Mentoring Association (2009).

What is an After Action Review?

An *After Action Review* is a process in which an activity that is completed, is analyzed for what went right, what went wrong, and what can be improved in the future.

How can After Action Reviews be useful for small non-profits?

After Action Reviews (AARs) bring together key players to reflect on the outcomes and lessons learned in a particular initiative, and to record those reflections for future activities. In addition to being helpful to future outcomes, AARs are an opportunity for small non-profits to share tacit knowledge, such as wisdom and experience that might otherwise not be articulated. AARs need not be a formal, facilitated process, but it is important that results be recorded and filed for future use.

After Action Review – Template

After Action Review	
Project Name	Project Date
People involved in Project	
Analysis	
What was supposed to happen?	
What actually happened?	
Why were there differences?	

(continues on page 23)

What worked?	
What didn't work?	
What would you do differently next time?	
AAR conducted by:	Date:

Adapted from: *De Long, D.W. (2004).*

SUDDEN LOSS OF EXECUTIVE PLAN – *TEMPLATE*

What is the purpose of a Sudden Loss of Executive Plan?

A *Sudden Loss of Executive Plan* helps ensure that critical business operations continue when an organization is faced with the sudden loss of key staff.

Why is it important for small non-profits to develop a Sudden Loss Plan?

Given the limited number of people involved in the operations of a small non-profit, the sudden loss of key staff can be catastrophic because there may not be replacement staff readily available. A well-developed plan can reduce this risk.

Note: Given the potentially sensitive nature of the information contained within the plan, consideration must be given to security of the document.

Sudden Loss of Executive Plan Template

Organization:	Name:	Position:

Emergency Successor(s) Name:	Position:

Security — User Name & Passwords		
Computer	Voicemail	e-mail
Security System	Other	

Security — Locations		
Building keys	Office keys	Filing cabinet keys
Locations of file back-ups	Other	

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Finances		
Funders	Bank Account	Persons with signing authority
Location of payroll records	Location of accounts records	Other

Job Duties/Responsibilities

Critical Operations- daily	Critical Operations- monthly	Critical Operations- annually

Date	Review Date:

Adapted from: Carver, John. (1997).

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TRAINING YOUR SUCCESSOR – *CHECKLIST*

What are the components of an effective training program?

An effective training program provides the foundation for acquiring organizational knowledge. It links the learner to contacts and knowledge resources, and builds commitment between the newcomer and the organization. Effective training focuses on more than the technical knowledge required to perform. It also focuses on the values, experiences and relationships that make up the organization.

Checklist for training your successor for the transfer of tacit knowledge

- ☐ Assess the newcomer's learning needs and assumptions about the organization.
- ☐ Create a training plan.
- ☐ Identify who will be involved in the training.
- ☐ Describe the organization's mission and values.
- ☐ Introduce the new person to staff, volunteers, networks and key contacts.
- ☐ Explain how these people work together to achieve the organization's goals.
- ☐ Explain how your role contributes to the vision.
- ☐ Explain the key responsibilities of your role.
- ☐ Discuss the contributions you have made to the organization and your personal vision for the organization's future.
- ☐ Share the history and stories of the organization – both the successes and the challenges.
- ☐ Allow time for knowledge to be absorbed and reflected upon.
- ☐ Encourage questions.
- ☐ Acknowledge that not all information will be retained during the training period.
- ☐ Identify key contacts and sources of organizational knowledge that can be accessed once the formal training is complete.

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL – *TIP SHEET*

What is social capital and how is it relevant to knowledge management?

Social capital can be defined as "ability of people to work together for common purposes and to trust each other" (Coleman, 1988) and is based on mutual understanding and commitment. Social capital is characterized by strong bonds, close connections, and overlapping spheres of influence — factors which can have a significant impact on organizational knowledge management practices.

Why is social capital important to small non-profits?

Social capital can help develop an environment that enables the transfer of knowledge. Creating and maintaining strong personal bonds that transcend formal employment relationships, can reduce the risk of knowledge being lost to the organization.

Tips to build social capital

Build commitment

- Hire based on cultural fit.
- Involve as many people as possible in the hiring process to confirm the fit and to develop an early network for the new hire.
- Emphasize values and organizational culture in the training and orientation.
- Collaborate on decision-making.

Focus on trust

- Hire for longevity.
- Keep promises and deliver on commitments.
- Develop networks within, and external to, the organization.

Enhance understanding

- Communicate openly and without confrontation.
- Find the common ground. Use common goals and values as the basis for decision-making, organizational initiatives and conflict resolution.

Sources: Cohen, D. & Prusak, L. (2001). Coleman, J.S. (1988).

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EFFECTIVE NETWORKS – *TIP SHEET*

How can networks be useful in managing knowledge?

Networks can make possible the sharing and co-creation of knowledge, and provide access to limitless knowledge that is not available when someone is working in isolation.

Why is it important for small non-profits to develop and maintain effective networks?

Effective networks contribute to the sustainability of small non-profit organizations. Networks increase adaptability to changing external environments through shared resources, wisdom and knowledge. Networks also foster participation, connections and contribution to the broader community.

Tips for developing and maintaining effective networks

- Consider how technology can assist in developing networks, such as social networking sites, blogs and wikis.
- Do not discount the utility of 'low-tech' options, such as a Rolodex.
- Remember that networks are ultimately about communication and connection.
- Analyze your current networks and determine where there may be gaps and opportunities.
- Develop and participate in *Communities of Practice* that are based on cooperation, reciprocity and common goals.
- When face-to-face connections are not possible, consider technology-enabled communication.
- Share knowledge and experience.
- Look inside and outside the organization when developing networks.
- Build on personal and professional connections.

Summary of Research

According to Statistics Canada (2005), Canada's workforce is aging rapidly, with a projected doubling of retirement-aged population by 2031. As a result, organizations will have to develop effective ways to manage their collective knowledge, or risk losing the wisdom and experience of their veteran personnel when they retire, putting their organization's sustainability at risk (DeLong, 2004). This risk is especially significant for small non-profit organizations because they already face challenges associated with small numbers of employees, limited resources and restrictions tied to how they are funded.

Lost knowledge as a result of staff turnover can have dire consequences on organizations. Not only can it affect an organization's capacity to be innovative and grow, it can increase errors, reduce efficiencies and damage the organization's credibility (Delong, 2004). In all the literature on knowledge management, there is widespread recognition that organizations are not managing their knowledge effectively, and that proactive solutions are required for retaining knowledge and transferring it to new employees.

However, little attention has been paid to knowledge management research as it affects small non-profit organizations — the grassroots of the social economy. These organizations may be at the greatest risk for lost knowledge.

The social economy is essentially a knowledge economy. The embedded knowledge of the people involved – who they know, what they know, and how they know it — is what drives the activity of the social economy. This study examines what can happen when the people that embody this knowledge no longer work for the organization.

Prince Edward Island provides a unique context for this study. Its social economy is predominantly comprised of small organizations and its social capital characterized by strong bonds, close connections, and overlapping spheres of influence, factors which may have an impact on organizational knowledge management practices.

There were three primary objectives of this research. The first was to assess the risk of lost knowledge in small non-profit organizations due to the loss of veteran personnel. The second was to identify the current practices around keeping and transferring knowledge, and to identify the factors that affect knowledge management. And finally, the study aimed to develop a Knowledge Management Toolkit which can be customized for small non-profit organizations to reduce the risk of lost knowledge due to staff turnover.

"I think that any time you lose somebody key, there is going to be a hiccup. Especially in a small organization like this, where each of us is key. You can't have a whole lot of attrition before you find yourself in an empty room." – *Study participant*

THEORY

This study was developed upon the assumptions that veteran employees of small non-profits embody valuable knowledge, and that losing them means organizational knowledge will be lost, too. In the context of Prince Edward Island's small non-profit community, this study examined the problem presented in the book, *Lost Knowledge: Confronting the Threat of an Aging Workforce* (DeLong, 2004). DeLong hypothesized that the impact of an aging workforce will be that knowledge based on experience — particularly experience that is not documented — will be lost as staff retire. This threat is not addressed because it is not known what to do about it.

DeLong asserts that knowledge is likely to be lost through ineffective documentation and storage of knowledge, as well as the failure to develop the environment in which experienced outgoing personnel can pass on their wisdom (2004, p. 54).

In order to address this potential loss, the term *knowledge* must first be defined. Knowledge has many definitions, both broad and abstract. For the purposes of this study, a narrow, action-oriented definition has been adopted, with knowledge considered to be "the capacity for effective action or decision-making in the context of organized activity" (DeLong, 2004, p. 21), where this capacity has been demonstrated in the organization's past activities.

In examining specific ways to retain knowledge within the organization, two broad types of knowledge were considered: explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be codified and stored (Nonaka, 1991); organizational examples include documents, databases, and work processes.

"We all have to kind of know each other's business and for me that is fairly indicative of the non-profit world. Because if you operate individually, you are sunk when somebody leaves for quite a while."
– Study participant

Tacit knowledge is the personal knowledge that exists in individuals' minds and consequently is not as easily accessed (Polanyi, 1966); examples include intuition, wisdom and experience. This study recognizes the multiplicitous nature of knowledge and the varying factors that affect knowledge management in small non-profit organizations.

At the heart of this inquiry were the processes of transferring explicit and tacit knowledge between veteran employees, and their organizations. An individual's knowledge can transcend into the organizational level (Lam, 2000) when this knowledge is acquired by future generations of employees. In the context of this study, with organizations comprised of one or few staff, the tacit knowledge of the veteran personnel *is* the corporate knowledge.

DeLong notes that the "most effective knowledge management strategies will require a customized, multifaceted and long-term commitment" (DeLong, 2004, p. 48). To that end, this study tried to determine what customizations might be required for small non-profits. Our result is a multi-faceted toolkit to address the problem.

Small organizations are unique with respect to their knowledge management capacity (Desouza & Awazu, 2006) in that they can be more social and share more common knowledge across the organization. They are adept at accessing external resources of knowledge, because they have had to do so as a matter of survival. In small organizations it is people, not technology, who are at the centre of knowledge management.

In studying knowledge management in small non-profits, it is important to note that the process of sharing knowledge involves either direct or indirect interaction. Therefore, the social context of small non-profits must be taken into account. Consequently, this study considered how social capital, defined as "the ability of people to work together for common purposes and to trust each other" (Coleman, 1988, p. 98), affected the knowledge management practices of small non-profit groups. Social capital was considered as one factor in sharing knowledge (Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998), particularly in terms of the social networks that exist around these small non-profit organizations.

King (2004) noted that non-profit organizations are inextricably rooted in the dimensions of social capital "networks, relationships and trust and shared vision and norms" (p. 482) and are essentially social capital in action.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in three phases: surveys, interviews and applied research. Study participants were obtained using a convenience sample through the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network as well as through publicly available sources of information about Prince Edward Island non-profit organizations.

"We had a transition plan in place, which seemed fine up until, quite frankly, we received the first part of this study. And when I received the first part of that study, it brought a number of areas where we were really quite lacking." – *Study participant*

Survey

The first phase involved a survey sent out to 99 non-profit organizations on Prince Edward Island with fewer than 10 employees. This survey had a 38% response rate. It generated quantitative data on knowledge retention and transfer practices, the barriers to these practices, the types of knowledge at risk of being lost when employees leave the organization, and the consequences of losing that knowledge. The survey results and interview findings informed the development of the Knowledge Management Toolkit.

Interviews

The second phase consisted of 10 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with key personnel of organizations who had participated in the survey. The interview questions expanded upon the survey findings, and probed into the knowledge management practices in the small non-profit sector. Participants were encouraged to share their organization's experiences with knowledge that was lost due to changes in personnel. The tenure of interview participants ranged from an acting Executive Director who had been in the position for three months, to a founding member of over 25 years.

Applied research

The final phase of the study involved the creation and delivery of a Knowledge Management Toolkit to apply the knowledge gained from the data collection and analysis. The Toolkit prototype was delivered in a workshop for small non-profits, which consisted of a presentation of this study, with breakout sessions on specific topics of the toolkit, followed by a facilitated discussion of the results of these sessions. A description of the workshop is included below (page 44).

FINDINGS

Knowledge management through documentation

The survey inquired into the type of information that is documented in the organizations, and found that policy and job descriptions were the most common (89.5% and 86.8% of participants, respectively). The least common practices were to document details about filing systems (26.3%) and exit interviews from departing staff (15.8%).

Survey participants reported that an average of 56.5% of their individual knowledge is captured in the organization's documentation, and the interview data reflected the split survey results. Many participants were confident that their organization's documents capture the individual's knowledge. Others are notably deficient. The ways in which individual knowledge has been retained in documents include:

- personal portfolio of accomplishments of one longstanding staff member;
- processes to ensure that knowledge exists in places other than the person's head; and
- drafting notes, lessons learned and plans for the future as part of a transition plan.

The interviews highlighted the wide range of documentation activities. Some organizations "document everything, processes and results" and organizational knowledge is well perpetuated in the work that the organizations produce. Conversely, others reported that the organization might be able to document more with stable funding, and that they could be better organized and purge more out-of-date information. Ways of storing documents for some participants are inconsistent. Most organizations reported having to document some information in their reports to funders.

The interviewees noted that other types of information documented include:

- mission and values statements;
- meeting minutes;
- strategic plans;
- governance;
- job descriptions and roles;
- sudden loss of executive plans;
- lists of networks/clients;
- performance evaluations;
- project evaluations;
- training manuals;
- annual reports;
- files with ideas for future projects;
- photos; and
- a wall calendar with staff appointments.

Regular, repetitive processes can be documented, but it is more difficult with context-specific activities. Short-term projects outside of the core business are not as well documented, and there is an absence of formal reflections of lessons learned and plans for the organization's future.

Many interview participants stated that too much documentation is as problematic as very little. It is important to document history, but it can be difficult to identify what will be significant in the future.

Participants reflected that valuable practices are:

- taking notes;
- keeping binders and information updated and accurate;
- printing important e-mails and filing for future reference; and
- including the context and rationale of decisions in e-mails for record keeping.

These practices are particularly important for successors, as the gap in documentation is felt most by those new to the organization.

Quality of documentation

In addition to asking what was documented, the survey inquired into the quality of that documentation. The majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their documentation is accurate (86.1%), easy to access (75.7%), easy to understand (80.0%), and centrally located (91.4%). About half reported that their documentation was complete (52.7%) and standardized (48.6%). The lowest scores were for updating regularly (41.6%). Organizations whose documentation is less complete also tend to document less personal knowledge, thus compounding the risk of lost knowledge.

Participants explained that while knowledge is often shared, documentation is not always preferred, or possible. For example, past successes are often discussed rather than documented. When work is not standardized, which is often the case in small non-profits, it is not easily translated into explicit documents.

There are also those things that have not been articulated, such as values which are implied, or plans which have not been formulated. These do not lend themselves easily to documentation. Participants noted that it is impossible to document everything and it comes down to priorities and resources. Every organization does things differently depending on need, and also depending on who determines what is significant.

Participants noted that there were several factors affecting the level and degree of the organization's documentation. Formal documentation is not always necessary to communicate with colleagues in a small organization. Organizations might not be aware where documentation may be lacking. Security and accessibility requirements also have an impact on the type of documentation. The archiving medium can also be a factor, because technology evolves so quickly and new media are not always compatible with their predecessors.

Knowledge transfer based on documentation

It is one thing to retain knowledge in documents, and another to use these documents to transfer knowledge. Responses were divided as to whether the next generation of staff will know how to do their jobs based on the organization's documentation. Over half (56.8%) agreed or strongly agreed, and 43.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

This result may be qualified by the reiteration throughout the interviews that many types of knowledge cannot be transferred through documentation. These include:

- the relationships between staff and board;
- the people involved and their histories;
- unofficial practices that cannot be, or should not be documented; and
- the overall understanding and learning processes of the organization.

Although documentation can be effective in transferring history, it was noted that some documents such as annual reports are merely perfunctory accounts of the organization's history.

Use of technology

The survey results indicated that the most common uses of technology are e-mail (92.1%), website (84.2%) and filing systems (76.3%). The interview participants reported a wide range of technology usage, with some organizations primarily using electronic documents, some primarily iusing hard copy files, and most a combination of the two. While some participants noted shortcomings in their organization's use of technology, such as a lack of server, network, or central filing system, none of the participants felt this was particularly problematic. These shortcomings were overcome through tactics such as sharing passwords and e-mailing documents that need to be shared. For most organizations, improving the ways in which technology is used is a 'nice to have' item, such as storing knowledge in alternate media like video.

From interviews, participants also noted that although there was a reliance on computers for documentation, processes for back-ups are not always meticulous and version control can be an issue, with many different, and not necessarily accurate, files existing at the same time. Documentation can be out of date, or too plentiful to be of use. Accessibility issues were noted with archives, although one participant qualified that the files that are inaccessible are the less critical ones.

Knowledge management through successor training

The most popular method of training successors, is by reading existing documentation (89.2%). Only 13.5% of staff are trained through a formal training program. From interview data, the ideal successor training program would include an overlap period between the outgoing and incoming staff member. This overlap would involve a job shadow or demonstration of how programs and daily business operations occur, as this was noted to be more effective than simply reading about it.

More important than demonstration and documentation, the ideal training would involve mentoring, where the successor could perform the job duties with the incumbent as a resource, at the same time providing enough distance to allow the successor to make their own way. The role of the mentor would be phased out over time. The role of formal or informal mentoring was described by numerous participants to be invaluable.

> *"I am a firm believer in mentorship. A firm, firm believer. I think that people gain the most knowledge and the most confidence when they can mentor under somebody and shadow someone."* – *Study participant*

Effectiveness of successor training

Overall, the respondents reported that training is effective. The majority of the respondents report high ratings (either communicating very well or adequately) for the transfer of their organization's operations (97.1%), history (84.4%), relationships (84.8%), networks (84.4%) and daily tasks (84.8%). The lowest ratings were on the context of decisions (54.5%) and the lessons learned (67.7%).

From interviews, it was learned that there are some challenges associated with the training process and the resources available. The difficulties in transferring tacit knowledge were emphasized, and it was noted that documentation is not always the source of knowledge. Several participants commented that although the successor would learn more from doing and through mentorship, than through a standard training regime, this might not be possible. One participant noted that the organization's lack of physical space will have an impact on the knowledge that is transferred to the successor.

The qualities of the successor — the receiver of the knowledge — will also have an impact on the success of the transition period. There may be challenges with the assumptions and values that the successor brings to an organization. It was noted that the incoming staff will have to know how to ask the right questions, and that time put into the training program will not necessarily translate into understanding.

Twenty-one percent of the surveyed organizations stated they were not sure if they planned to hire in the next five years. Twenty-six percent stated that there would be none, or very few, new hires. Forty-two percent reported that between one to five new hires were anticipated and one participant reported that more than five would likely be hired in the next five years.

Knowledge retention and sharing practices

According to the interview participants, knowledge management practices that can aid in retaining the organizational knowledge that veteran staff hold include:

- maintaining relationships with previous staff;
- promoting from within;
- keeping an open door policy;
- sharing knowledge within the organization;
- planning succession and transfer of knowledge by delegating responsibilities to other members of organization, staff, or Board;
- documenting knowledge;
- preparing reports for departure; and
- making organizational decisions by consensus.

These practices can also help ensure that knowledge does not exist in silos within the organization.

"Knowledge sharing must become a part of your culture."
– Study participant

Interview participants reported that knowledge can be partly retained through documentation practices such as:

- building into projects some way of recording, documenting and giving back to members;
- recording projects that have been done;
- keeping records and purging insignificant information as matter of practice, and using reporting practices as a method for retaining the significant.

One participant noted that reporting requirements from funders have become less onerous, although often not reflective of project success in any meaningful way, and therefore not a valuable venue for knowledge retention.

Tactics to sharing knowledge that are used or recommended by interview participants included ensuring that knowledge is shared between Board and staff. Knowledge sharing must be part of the culture, and be embedded in:

- formal structures such as governance with a President and Past President seat on the Board;
- human resources practices such as hiring from within, and retaining outgoing staff in some capacity to facilitate knowledge transfer; and
- networks, with the sharing of knowledge both within the organization and with other non-profit organizations.

Factors affecting knowledge management

Organization resources

The study revealed several barriers that small non-profit organizations face when managing knowledge. The most frequently reported barriers in the survey results were time (58.8%) and money (52.9%). Only 8.8% reported that there were no barriers.

There is not enough time or money to document regularly, to develop processes for documentation, or to consider the problem of knowledge transfer with a successor. It was often noted that a reliance on project funding has an impact on maintaining a stable staff. Staff are often not permanent, there is no job security, and layoffs can be a natural part of day-to-day business because the organization is funded from project to project.

Overlap between outgoing and incoming staff is not always possible because it can take longer to hire a replacement than the notice given by the incumbent, plus finances may prohibit paying two salaries. For the incoming staff, particularly when there is no overlap, knowledge transfer is dependent upon the practices of their predecessors. It was also noted that because small non-profits rely heavily on volunteer Boards, it is difficult to motivate these busy people to dedicate energy to knowledge retention and transfer efforts.

The reality reported by most organizations was that there are likely not the resources available for an ideal transition. Successors will learn by trial and error, by experience, and by relying on remaining staff and networks. Participants reported that practices that can help deal with this reality are:

- a celebration of the transition with a welcome/farewell party;
- hiring someone from within, so the training is about the mechanics of the job instead of the principles;
- adequate recording practices; and
- storytelling ingrained in the organization's culture.

Organization size

According to the interviews, small organizations are at risk of knowledge loss because when there are a small number of staff, organizational knowledge resides with fewer individuals. This means that if funding instabilities translate into staff turnover, or there is a sudden loss of a key individual, the shocks are greater.

"An organization mustn't depend upon one person…if we can replace the Pope, we can replace anybody." – *Study participant*

Participants stated that organizations must foster a knowledge sharing culture, and in fact this knowledge sharing is a requirement for empowered staff. Organizations should not be anchored in the knowledge that one or few individuals possess. Often, individual knowledge cannot be documented or shared due to time and resources constraints, and some individual knowledge may not be readily translatable. The individual staff person is in a privileged position in a small organization. He/she is the embodiment of the organization's accumulated history and its relationships, and knows what knowledge to purge or to retain. Participants noted that staff often extend the employment relationship longer than planned to ensure that the knowledge is preserved.

The size of small organizations means that individual qualities and relationships have a large impact on how the organization operates and on how knowledge is transferred. Overall in non-profits, individuals often have a vested interest in the success of the organization, as values and goals are often in alignment between the individual and the organization. Individual characteristics of the newcomer also affect the transfer of knowledge.

Priorities

Few participants reported that there are no perceived benefits of knowledge management. But when asked whether the potential loss of knowledge due to attrition is considered to be a problem in the organization, 45.5% said no, while 54.5% either agreed, or strongly agreed. The interviews confirmed this split opinion. It was stated that the risk of lost knowledge is not considered to be a priority, and knowledge management is not a priority, against the immediate social needs that

small non-profits address. Even if there were resources to dedicate to knowledge management, they would likely be funnelled elsewhere to higher priorities.

> *"We kind of act as if what is happening now will probably go on forever. I will always be here, they will always be the Board, and nothing will ever change."– Study participant*

It was noted that succession planning is also not a priority, although knowledge retention is important. Boards often do not plan for succession because often they do not have to — historically, staff are longstanding in small non-profits and maintain ties with the organization after they leave.

Operating environment

The operating environment in which small non-profits must sustain themselves has many implications for knowledge management. The factors which affect the organization's sustainability, have a direct impact on knowledge retention, and vice versa. Organizations must face the reality that the new generation of workers may not be willing to sacrifice work/life balance for the good of the organization, and efforts by the outgoing generation to keep the organization afloat through volunteer hours may not be repeated. At the same time, the risks of lost knowledge may be minimized by the practices that non-profits have created to survive, with everyone knowing the minimum requirements to sustain the overall function of the organization.

Ultimately, interviewees reported that the organization will be sustained as long as knowledge based on the values and culture of the organization is transmitted. Positive contributors to knowledge retention were described as:

- the practice of promoting from within;
- consensus decision-making;
- lack of hierarchy;
- team approach; and
- knowledge sharing as a part of operating practices.

Small non-profits are heavily reliant on volunteer service, from staff as well as from volunteers. The Board's involvement in the organization can have an impact on knowledge retention, with Boards acting as *de facto* staff if highly involved in the activities of daily operations.

The interviewees noted that in addition to the barriers, there are also numerous organizational requirements that have an impact on what and how knowledge is managed. Accessibility is one factor which must be considered in terms of the abilities of those who must take part in sharing knowledge. The content of reports is driven by audiences such as funders and partners, who may have different priorities than the organization. Not all organizational knowledge can be, or should be explicit, such as unofficial policies or context-specific activities.

Being adaptable and resourceful is a requirement for survival of resource-limited non-profits (Desouza and Awazu, 2006; Wynne, 2007) and maintaining formal documentation is not always conducive to this level of flexibility. In addition, every small non-profit is different, and standardized processes that capture knowledge in some types of organizations may not translate well to the small non-profit environment. Small non-profts must select and use tools that they can customize to meet their own particular needs.

Nature of knowledge

The risks and potential solutions to knowledge management are as varied as the types of knowledge. The complexity of knowledge is reflected in the study results and can range from knowledge that has not yet been made explicit, to that which must have the right questions asked to be articulated, to that which is based on norms, beliefs and values (DeLong, 2004).

Interview participants also noted difficulties in determining which knowledge may be significant in the future. There are problems in keeping documents current, and even if it were possible to maintain effective documentation, different people prefer different types of knowledge when they are learning.

However, the nature of knowledge itself puts knowledge retention and transfer at risk. Knowledge about people, relationships, and expectations are all context-specific, and this type of knowledge is difficult to document in any realistic and accurate way that is reflective of the spirit of that knowledge. Much of the knowledge in a small non-profit is based on intuition and wisdom, and is to some degree, innate.

There are challenges in making tacit knowledge explicit, if that is a goal, given the social nature of knowledge. One participant observed that knowledge is essentially community knowledge — it is not owned by one person. and embodies a spirit which cannot be stored in a file. Conversely, another participant noted that the work of the organization is to document and share knowledge, and therefore knowledge management is at the forefront of the organization's goals and activities.

In terms of the limitations that documentation has in adequately capturing knowledge, it was noted that one cannot document every context of day-to-day operations because it depends on the people who are involved. There can be too much context-specific information to transfer or retain. Documents are also ineffective in networking and building relationships.

Social capital

The constructs of social capital were reported by interview participants to be a factor in retaining and transferring knowledge. Knowledge itself was described as a social entity, residing in the minds of all who are involved, with knowledge transfer dependent on relationships and trust between people. These relationships can be founded in the shared values of the organization and can help to bond staff to the organization even after the formal employment relationship is severed. Networks can be used to attract new people with common values to the organization.

Trust and respect among the people within the organization are important factors in retaining and transferring knowledge. If these bonds are not created, then the operation of the organization, including its knowledge management practices, will reflect that. When there are strong bonds, participants noted that the people within the organization are like family. They are bound together by a cause that is beyond a standard employment relationship, and it is more like a lifestyle choice with longstanding ties and involvement. As a result, formal knowledge transfer practices need not be developed because the predecessor is often available and maintains ties to the organization after they have left it.

Participants noted that knowledge is transferred and retained because people have conversations and opportunities to share. Social links are not always incorporated into the next generation of staff, because introductions to the network are not necessarily part of the orientation. It was noted, however, that knowledge will endure as long as people are dedicated to the values and the cause.

A comfort in asking questions, and trust, must exist within the organization; and between the veteran staff and the successor, for knowledge transfer to be effective. Essentially, effective social capital contributes to knowledge transfer (Stenmark, 2001) and can overcome inherent challenges that are associated with small organizations. Opportunities for individual knowledge to transcend into the organization (Lam, 2000) can be facilitated by the networks and values that small non-profits share.

"…it's knowledge that you have gained over the years, but it's not really on paper…it is going to be hard to transmit to someone else."
– Study participant

The interviews confirmed that small non-profits can use their shared values as safety nets for knowledge loss (McKee & Driscoll, 2008), although they are more likely to do this in an informal manner. Ultimately, social capital can contribute to knowledge management if is characterized by trust, shared values, common goals, and strong bonds (Cohen and Prusak, 2001), but it can also be a detriment. The accounts of two interviewees demonstrated that weak ties and an organization characterized by a lack of trust (Nahapiet and Ghosal, 1998), the negative side of social capital, can impede the transfer of knowledge.

Consequences of lost knowledge

The most frequent consequence of lost knowledge reported in the survey was less ability to be innovative, or build on previous experiences (79.4%). All other responses listed (inefficiencies, more errors, missed opportunity for expansion of services, and loss of community relationships) also ranked high, with at least a 50% frequency of response. One participant noted that the risk was the possible demise of the organization. While the majority shared positive experiences and projections for future knowledge transfer, this was not the case with all organizations

Many interviewees reported that their organization's board does not typically plan for turnover of key staff. This has a large impact on those organizations whose knowledge is embodied in the outgoing staff person. Participants generally reported

that the organization would continue well enough with the loss of key staff. It might take some time for the newcomer to get up to speed, and this would mean that others in the organization would have to pick up the slack temporarily. It was acknowledged that staff of small non-profits have to have generalized knowledge of the organization and be adaptable, for the organization to sustain itself.

The greatest consequences noted by the interview participants were in terms of the vision of the organization — if it has not been articulated, or if it is primarily based on the characteristics of the incumbent — and password protected items such as the financials. For those interview participants who entered the organization in a period of knowledge transfer dysfunction, it took months or years to be fully functional in their jobs. It was noted that knowledge is also lost in turnover of volunteers and volunteer board members, but if there is enough stability in staff, organizations can weather this. This level of stability was reported as being directly connected to the funding status — whether organizations have stable core funding, or whether they rely on more volatile and temporary funds.

DISCUSSION

There are some areas in which the participating organizations could improve the ways and types of knowledge documented. Knowledge that could be codified more frequently includes:

- exit interviews from departing staff;
- details about filing systems;
- business procedures; and
- lessons learned.

There were also gaps noted in the quality of documentation — whether documents were complete, standardized and updated regularly. It was evident in the survey responses that only about half of individual knowledge is typically retained in documents, yet that documentation is relied upon to train the next generation.

In this study, knowledge retention and transfer was analyzed on two dimensions, within the current organization and across to the next generation of staff. The value of knowledge retained within the existing organization was diminished if the information was not complete or updated regularly. Participants noted that reports required for funders often fail to document lessons learned from projects or previous initiatives, indicating that there is a lack of reflection captured in the mandatory reporting.

"The problem with most funders is that they want to check boxes...from our perspective that is not necessarily of any value."
– Study participant

Suggestions for toolkit

While most interview participants emphasized the superficiality of documentation in capturing organizational knowledge, they acknowledged that there are pragmatic benefits to effective documentation. They made numerous suggestions on how documentation could contribute to knowledge retention and transfer. Regular purging of information that has not been used in several years was also recommended, being careful to retain that which is historically significant.

It is critical to make the overall structure of the organization explicit. Articulating the organization's values and goals, developing policies, defining roles and creating job descriptions are all effective ways in which to capture, at a macro level, the work of the organization. Operationally, the participants stated that a binder with forms, templates and general description of programs is useful, as well as more detailed descriptions of programs. A timeline for regular activities and events is another way in which the work of the organization can be documented.

For electronic storage of information, it was recommended that files be organized systemically on shared drives or networks, that files be backed up regularly and that these backups be stored offsite. The organization's templates, graphics and forms should be housed in a folder that is accessible to all who need them. This accessibility should be tempered by the need for security, such as in the case of financial details or passwords, where universal access would be inappropriate. Secure information should be shared with a limited number of people, with the caveat that no critical organizational knowledge resides with only one individual.

Some participants recommended that exit strategies be put in place for foreseeable departures of senior staff, and most agreed that in the case of an unforeseeable exit, a Sudden Loss of Executive Director document or 'Executive Vacancy Contingency Plan' (Carver, 1997) would be beneficial to ensure that the organization can continue critical operations despite staffing disruption. This document would include nuts and bolts items such as passwords, how to access files and locate important items.

For newcomers to the organizations, it should be expected that not all knowledge will be retained during the training period, and a responsive training program will include an assessment of what the successor already knows. It should include the key responsibilities of the position, and an orientation to the organization's history, challenges, successes and key players. Participants suggested that an introduction to the network, preferably in person, but at least via e-mail, is a way to connect with the sources of organizational knowledge.

In order to foster a culture of sharing knowledge, participants reported numerous practices which can be effective. Shared calendars and e-mail allow staff to be aware of each other's schedules and activities. Meeting agendas should include significant decisions and activities that have occurred since the last meeting. Meeting minutes should build upon these annotated agendas, and during the meeting a roundtable should be done to capture any items not included on the agenda. Those persons not in attendance should be debriefed after meetings. One participant recommended that imparting knowledge to others should be included in the official job description.

To effectively retain organizational knowledge, useful practices include:

- cataloguing speeches;
- reporting a summary of issues; and
- including a subjective narrative along with the more factual information in required reports.

Embedding workshop processes in the agenda and then reporting afterward is a way in which one participating organization ensures that acquired knowledge is shared among the wider community. Another recommended the use of alternative media, like video, to document organizational knowledge. Overall, participants responded that any documentation has to be a reasonable part of work processes, and suggested that checklists which describe knowledge that can be documented, may be useful.

Ultimately, participants responded that the critical factor in knowledge retention and transfer is the people involved. The importance of networking was noted for resource-limited non-profits, and it was suggested that the identification of existing networks to newcomers to the organization could facilitate future knowledge exchanges. The effectiveness of knowledge sharing is about relationships between people, and is based on trust. Anticipating and addressing knowledge gaps is everyone's responsibility.

Knowledge management workshop

The Toolkit was presented in a workshop for small non-profit organizations in January 2010, attended by 16 members of Prince Edward Island's diverse social economy. During the two-hour workshop, participants were provided with a summary of the research and a copy of the Toolkit, and were guided through a series of activities related to knowledge management. Objectives of the workshop were:

- to learn about knowledge management;
- to share knowledge management experiences and challenges; and
- to acquire knowledge management tools that can reduce the risk of lost knowledge.

In the first activity, the participants were asked to introduce themselves and share their experiences with knowledge management. The participants repeated many of the survey and interview findings, citing challenges related to:

- inadequate transitions;
- knowledge residing with one or few members of the organization;
- reliability of technology;
- knowledge sharing as part of the organizational culture;

- knowledge retention and transfer with volunteers;
- funding, funder and community relationship issues as they impact on knowledge transfer;
- complexity of knowledge acquisition in the non-profit community;
- minimal resources;
- putting knowledge management into practice;
- transfer of knowledge across generations;
- staff and Board turnover;
- power imbalances;
- knowledge management with satellite offices and the broader community; and
- underestimating new knowledge.

The participants were then led through the first two Toolkit documents on identifying risk and overcoming barriers. This exercise raised awareness of the different types of knowledge that could be at risk, and emphasized that the tactics used to address these risks must work within, or overcome, the barriers that may exist. It was emphasized that there is no quick solution to the challenges that organizations face, but that effective knowledge management can be achieved through numerous small efforts, across the long term.

The workshop focused on two approaches to knowledge management: the short term transition that can occur with the unforeseen loss of key personnel, and the plan to ensure that knowledge is transferred and retained with planned exits of personnel.

For the short term focus, participants were provided with a template and asked to work on their own *Sudden Loss of Executive Plan,* and then discuss the exercise with the group. Participants reported that the approach was similar to planning for someone's vacation, to ensure that critical operations continue. Ideas shared in the plenary session included security considerations, separating personal information from work, and soliciting more information from other people in the organization to capture all critical knowledge.

Suggestions were made to change the template to better meet the organization's needs. This was an ideal opportunity to remind participants that the tools provided are meant to be customized for the individual circumstance, and that there is no one right way to approach knowledge management.

One participant shared a technique to reduce lost knowledge in the event of a sudden loss: weekly team meetings are held in which members share what they are working on. It was noted that this approach assumes there is more than one person on staff.

For the long term approach, participants were asked to work in groups to develop a knowledge exit strategy using the tool provided in the Toolkit, and to share their experiences about the process. The groups reported that it was a valuable exercise to start thinking about planned exits. In particular, the questions that related to the most important role of the person leaving, and the important things known about the organization, would be revealing.

One participant shared that these are the types of questions that she has used successfully in exit interviews. The groups discussed that the standard notice period is inadequate to transfer all critical knowledge. They recommended building on what staff already know and involving staff in finding their successor, and noted that relationships and the people involved are the keys to success.

The final activity was an evaluation of the workshop, using an After Action Review, contained in the Toolkit. The purpose of this activity was two-fold: to introduce the participants to the collaboration involved in an After Action Review, as well as to gather information for the evaluation of the workshop. The participants worked in three groups and provided the following feedback: they enjoyed the opportunity to share experiences, be exposed to new ideas and work with others as part of the process, but would have preferred more time and space for the activities and to develop ideas. They suggested that providing the materials ahead of time, and arranging the groups based on common interests, would have contributed positively to the experience.

CONCLUSION

The objectives of this research were:

- to assess the risk of lost knowledge in small non-profit organizations associated with the loss of veteran personnel;
- to identify the current knowledge retention and transfer practices and the factors that affect knowledge management in small non-profit organizations; and
- to develop a knowledge management toolkit for small non-profit organizations to reduce the risk of lost knowledge due to staff turnover.

We found that small non-profits, through resourcefulness and use of social capital, have the capacity to manage knowledge effectively, although there are some notable risks. The toolkit developed was based on the best practices of the participating organizations and further suggestions of solutions that meet organizational needs.

The primary target group for this study was Prince Edward Island's social economy sector, and in particular, community organizations with fewer than 10 employees. The ultimate goal was to assist these organizations in preserving and transferring knowledge so that they can face challenges armed with the experience and wisdom of their personnel, both past and present. It also aimed to raise awareness within

social economy organizations and their funders, of the importance of knowledge management and the factors that affect knowledge management practices.

The survey questions were designed to prompt the participants into thinking about knowledge retention and transfer practices. Research findings will be shared with the participants, interested organizations in the social economy and public policy makers. In addition to raising awareness, this study hopes to empower social economy organizations to make efficient and effective choices about their organization's knowledge management practices.

The project contributes to the literature on knowledge management by examining practices in small non-profits, an area that has thus far been neglected. It is hoped that the lessons learned from the research in Prince Edward Island will be valuable in other settings. It is also hoped that it will prompt more research into the knowledge management successes and challenges in the non-profit sector, and inspire action toward sustainability by both organizations and their funding bodies.

"Even if you lost all the information that is in this office or in that computer, as long as there are people who are committed to the purpose and the values that are important to that purpose, then the organization will endure." – *Study participant*

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Small non-profit organizations are the backbone of the social economy on Prince Edward Island. They achieve a great deal with small staff, volunteer boards, and limited resources. Their staff tend to have too much work, with too little time or money to do it. Each staff person quickly becomes a key member, and succeeds by multi-tasking, plus creating networks with other individuals or groups.

The embedded knowledge of such staff gained over the years -- who they know, what they know, and how they know it -- is lost when that person retires, or moves on to another job outside of the non-profit. Because of limited resources, it may be months before a new person is hired and he or she then has to recapture that embedded knowledge, or re-create it.

"If we could only know in the future, what we know now," said one participant in the research survey that helped create this toolkit.

This report and toolkit offers ways for small non-profit organizations to retain, manage and transfer the knowledge that is key to their organization. Author Barbara Groome Wynne has prepared toolkit sheets which can be photocopied, filled out and filed which will capture the organizations's explicit knowledge -- that which can be codified and stored, such as documents, databases, and work processes -- and the organizations's tacit knowledge, which is the experience, widsom, and intuition of its staff, and board members.

It will save years in learning curves and duplicated efforts for small non-profit organizations, and ensure that new staff can contribute sooner, and more easily.

Every small non-profit organization can benefit from this Toolkit and Research Report.

Barbara Groome Wynne is a communications specialist with a background in research, training, and organizational communications. She holds a Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology from the University of Alberta and has spent the past several years researching the social economy in Prince Edward Island. Her focus has been on social capital, sustainability and the ways in which social organizations communicate internally and with other funders, policymakers and community partners. Her work has been published previously by the Island Press and supported by the Atlantic Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network.

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