

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING POST COVID-19



Highlights from the Major Projects Association online discussion held on 21st May 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many major projects organisations to place staff on furlough, and many more employees are working from home. The longer this situation persists, the risk increases that a significant proportion of staff will leave the sector or opt for early retirement. This could have a serious short-term impact on the ability of major project organisations to access the competencies they need, and an even bigger long-term impact on the collective knowledge and know-how of the sector.

At this Major Projects Association discussion, members shared insight on:

- **Assessing** the scale of the problem for their organisation.
- **Mitigating** the risk of an unplanned knowledge exodus by ensuring staff feel valued by the organisation and engaged with their work.
- **Capturing** accumulated knowledge and know-how of experienced employees to support organisational learning.
- **Implementing** any accelerated organisational learning programme.

This brief report touches on a number of issues explored in more depth in the Association's February 2020 report [Improving Organisational Learning](#).

ASSESSING THE SCALE OF THE POST COVID-19 CHALLENGE

'First we want to mitigate the risk of people leaving. We want to make them feel valued, that they are still part of the organisation. But some people who were going to take retirement in five years' time will potentially do that now. We need to look at how we best capture the knowledge of those people.'

Ben Keen, Chief of Staff, Chief Executive Nuclear, Babcock International

Ben Keen explained how Babcock had assessed the potential impact of COVID-19 on the organisation's technical competency. The work has focused on the potential for significant increases in early retirement or staff exiting to other industries. The analysis process included:

- Detailed mapping of workforce status (including age, expected retirement date, if/how working during the crisis) against Babcock's technical competency framework.

- The addition of data on the impact of COVID-19 on workforces in other countries, and historic data on long-term sickness and other relevant factors.
- Creation of a risk model to identify the groups of the workforce presenting the greatest risk of exit and how this risk profile changed with the length of the crisis. Babcock's model revealed a significant proportion of employees may be at risk of leaving, the highest proportion being amongst the blue-collar workforce.
- The outputs from the model were mapped against Babcock's nuclear baseline to highlight priority areas of the business for maintaining or growing the firm's roster of Suitably Qualified & Experienced Persons (SQEP).

This has all enabled the HR and Organisational Development functions to engage directly with business units to mitigate the risks of staff departures. Where people do choose to leave, the task is to identify the most effective way of capturing information and insight and convert it into knowledge and information for the next generation taking over these roles.

MITIGATING THE RISK OF KNOWLEDGE EXODUS

Efforts by companies to mitigate the risk of a post COVID-19 knowledge exodus are focusing on ensuring furloughed or homeworking staff feel valued by the organisation and engaged with their work. These are permanent challenges for any organisation, which the pandemic has brought into immediate focus.

Communications, for example, have moved to media such as video blogs and webcasts, which have helped humanise senior leadership – who in turn have been willing to share their personal challenges. These tools can also help engage staff through interactivity and transparency via real-time Q&A.

The need to generate wider process and practice change is also an opportunity to keep both blue-collar and white-collar staff feeling engaged and valued – for example many site processes are having to be redesigned in granular detail to cope with social distancing requirements. In normal times an effective way of improving processes is to provide people with time to reflect on how what they actually do deviates from written procedures. If this is an improvement, it should be incorporated into the process.

The extended lockdown has created just such a window, in which employees can be given a metaphorical blank sheet of paper and asked to think about how they would design the processes they use.

'The people best placed to tell you how to do the job are the people doing the job.'

Al Simmonite, Managing Director, Advance Consultancy

FELLOWSHIP AND ASSOCIATE SCHEMES

Fellowship or Associate schemes offer organisations a way to recognise staff for their expertise. In addition to providing an alternative career progression pathway they are a vehicle for disseminating both codified knowledge and experiential know-how.

In the post COVID-19 context, the ability to extend Fellowship into an employee's retirement is attractive. Retired Fellows can return to the organisation on a temporary basis to help with mentoring, setting up projects in their specialist areas or to give other forms of advice. A small retainer and some form of Fellows network can help keep them professionally and emotionally engaged when not contributing directly.

As an example, the Rolls-Royce Engineering Fellowship is comprised of a global team of around 100 experts covering all of the technical disciplines that are important to the company's success now and in the future. The Fellowship is used throughout the company to tackle important technical issues and identify radical, innovative ideas that create new opportunities for Rolls-Royce.

Their influence extends outside the company to Government, Institutes, Academia and so on. The Fellowship is active in mentoring technical specialists who have the potential to become Fellows themselves in the future. The annual Fellows Conference and supporting activities are seen as key elements in moving engineering forwards in Rolls-Royce.

While Rolls-Royce's scheme is focused on engineering, it can be extended to other disciplines. BAE Systems for example offer fellowships in three categories: engineering, project management and manufacturing.

These types of schemes are harder to operate at the blue-collar level, but mentoring schemes can provide some of the same benefits. Reverse mentoring or buddy-schemes can ensure that these benefits flow both ways between generations.

CAPTURING ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE AND KNOW-HOW TO SUPPORT ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

The discussion followed the Major Projects Association's *Improving Organisational Learning* report by making a distinction between capturing information and data, and capturing lived experience and know-how.

Information and data present challenges that are primarily process-related. Simply collecting large volumes of information is of little value. At worst it can generate more work, as people are forced to search manually through multiple documents or hours of recordings to find the information they need.

Rapidly changing technology can also mean that today's storage media is inaccessible within a few years. Finally, security can also be an issue. Servers for Cloud storage can be located overseas, which will be an issue in sectors such as defence and nuclear.

Purpose, structure and discipline are needed to convert information into usable insight and to preserve its value. Important steps include:

- **Identify what you are looking for.** Consult widely on what is needed before going out to request information.
- **Identify who is holding what information** and in what format.
- **Create a taxonomy and data structure** to ensure that information is collected in a standardised format and is easy to deploy.
- **Think about data migration** to ensure that data is accessible to future employees. [The Digital Preservation Coalition](#) can provide advice. In sectors with assets with long liabilities, ensure you have a strategy for dealing with the evolution of language.
- **Think about storage and security.** Ensure you understand the sensitivity of data and your legal requirements. Take advice on potential back doors into your system.

Lived experience and know-how: Often what is of danger of being lost post COVID-19 is less information, and more an opportunity to grow know-how through understanding an experienced colleague's thought process.

Firms need to create strong social processes inside the organisation and chisel out time and space for them to flourish. Ideally these processes should embrace the supply chain, as this is where much of the accumulated wisdom needed to deliver projects will be found.

Some useful tools include:

- **Communities of Practice:** BAE Systems operate multiple Communities of Practice (CoPs) across the organisation. CoPs can be theme or discipline based and are open to all interested employees. Leadership of a CoP is another way of keeping experienced staff engaged, whilst generating very effective networks for sharing knowledge and experience. They can also support a wider growth of the problem-solving capacity of the organisation.
- **Fellowship or Associate Networks:** See above.
- **Project narratives:** Asking senior staff to write down their experience of a project, warts and all, can help highlight thinking processes and potential pitfalls. This has worked well for suspended projects taken over by new leaders upon restart.
- **Q&A sessions with project leaders:** Lunchtime or evening sessions where staff can hear project leaders' war stories and ask them direct questions in a safe environment have been useful.
- **Academies:** Creating the right physical and cultural environment for learning is important. Babcock and BAE Systems were among the organisations which have set up one or more academies to act as a focal point for organisational learning.

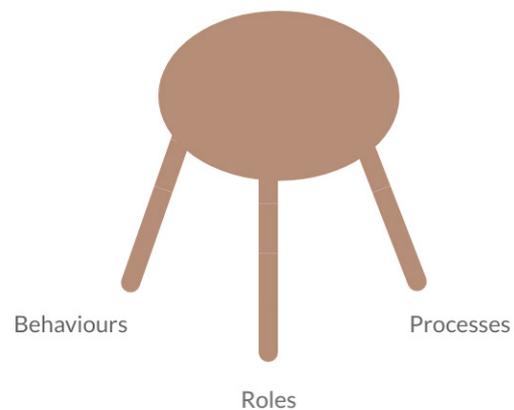
POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- Do we need separate programmes for blue-collar and white-collar staff?
- Are there more opportunities to collaborate at a sector level to improve major project organisations' capacity for organisational learning?
- How would an increased level of teleworking effect the social processes that underpin the exchange of know-how and lived experience?

IMPLEMENTING AN ACCELERATED ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMME

Accelerating organisational learning is a change programme. As with any other change programme it should be approached systematically, embracing:

- **Systems:** Including processes for collating and preserving information.
- **Structures:** Including roles and responsibilities, incentives and rewards.
- **Culture:** Identifying and incentivising the desired behaviours and creating an environment in which they flourish.



The Balanced Stool

All three elements of this structure need to be addressed in a coherent programme for change to be effective.

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Participating Organisations:

Advance Consultancy Ltd
Babcock International
BAE Systems
Major Projects Association
Ministry of Defence
National Grid
Nuclear Decommissioning Authority
Rolls-Royce plc
Turner & Townsend

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