Digital Connections | Knowledge Transfer in Hybrid Environments
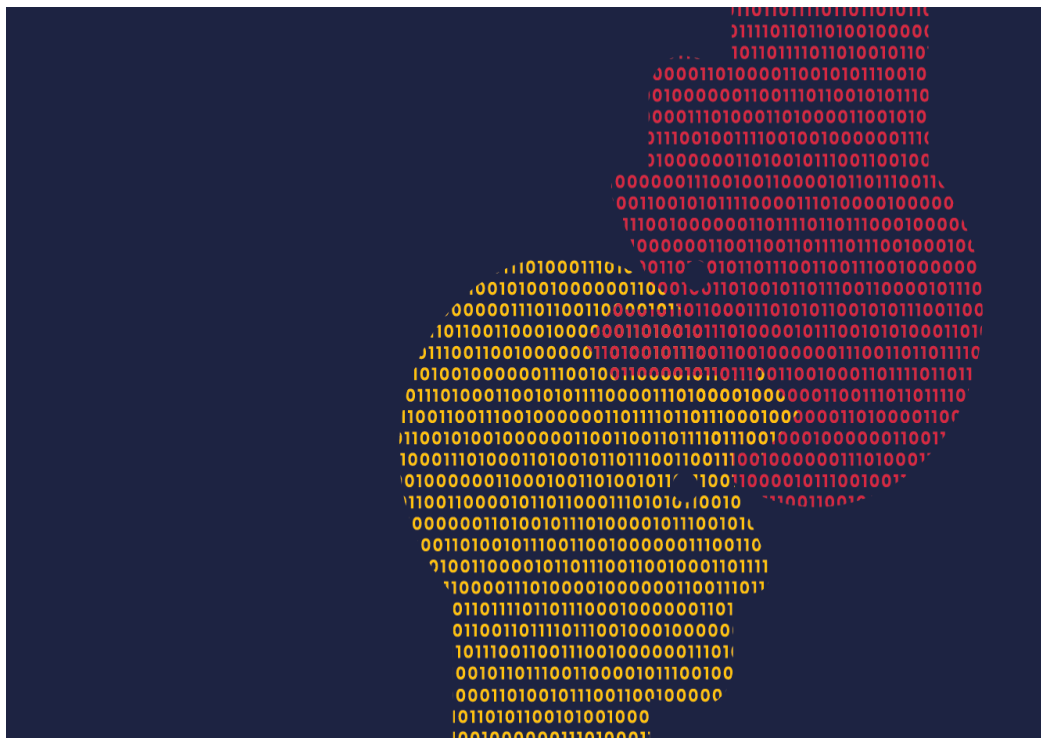
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The Deloitte study Global Human Capital Trends found organisations believe "knowledge management" to be one of the top three issues influencing their success. And yet, despite how crucial it is for operational continuity and growth, large aspects of knowledge management are often left to informal structures and unengaged team dynamics. Making meaningful shifts in practice are seen as too hard and not going to last.

You can imagine that if this was an area already neglected for its intractability before the shift to hybrid work, it is only more complex now. Fortunately, while hybrid work is an emerging reality, virtual work and virtual teams have been around for some time. There is a burgeoning body of research on how these teams operate and what are some of the key focuses we need to hold in this space to facilitate knowledge transfer.

When it comes down to it, knowledge sharing requires people to talk in order to transfer tacit knowledge. And to be talking in environments where there is a sense of trust, connection and confidence. As leaders, we need to get people and ideas circulating, not stagnating in in-groups (or even worse, no groups), so that knowledge moves through the system.

Here are four key dimensions to consider in having an effective hybrid knowledge transfer strategy:

Systems or processes that ask individuals to reach out to one another will not work unless there's the culture to back it up. We need a foundation of psychological safety and trust, which enables people to talk, share and connect. And this has only become more crucial in virtual and hybrid environments.

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as "… a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." Asking for help or knowledge, as well as offering advice or knowledge unprompted, are two interpersonal risks. Unless

there's a sense that we're safe, on one hand, to not know things and, on the other, to offer our experience, then no practical strategies will deliver the results we are looking for.

Research has found "… that knowledge sharing in virtual teams is positively correlated with motivation, ICT, trust, and leadership, while being negatively correlated with culture and conflict". Building trust and psychological safety in your team to share for the collective good is going to have an outsized impact on your knowledge sharing strategy and prevent knowledge hoarding in parts of the ecosystem.

TIP: Generate a social contract with your team so that everyone is on the same page about how to treat each other and what the team is aspiring towards

Motivation to ask and to share

The knowledge-sharing process starts with motivation – a willingness to ask and a corresponding willingness to share. In the hybrid world, the extra step to call or contact another team member, rather than being able to turn to them in the office, can be enough to stop us from reaching out at all. The person

seeking knowledge must not be deterred from asking by fear of social reproval or authority. Equally, the person holding the knowledge must have a desire and openness to share.

One simple workaround adopted by many organisations is using messenger services which are able to indicate a status where one has an "open virtual door". This means other team members know that the person is available for questions. It also has the added benefit of allowing the person with the knowledge to plan ahead and be purposeful about the time they spend knowledge sharing in balance with other activities.

Implementing such a system or equivalent requires team leaders to play their part as knowledge-sharing role models. By setting an expectation that making time to share knowledge is important – and demonstrating it – the team will adopt similar approaches.

TIP: Create or use a system which virtually indicates when people are open for questions (and then role model using it)

Forums to exchange

Research has demonstrated that when it comes to knowledge sharing, structure is more important than incentives. A study published in the HBR found that, after holding guided knowledge-sharing meetings between team members and high performers, "discussing one's job-specific problems with high performers, in just a single meeting, can have long-lasting [positive] performance implications." The guided meeting intervention was far more impactful than financial incentives linked to sharing and performance.

The results underline that a very concrete way we can encourage knowledge transfer is to provide the structure or space for it. Setting up regular opportunities for team members to share their experiences and learn from each other can have immense benefits. This could be a simple regular problem-solving meeting or a revolving opportunity for team members to present an idea, design, or case to the broader group. When setting up these meetings virtually, or as hybrid, remember to make them accessible and equitable (see our article on the Hybrid Equation for more on this). Mentoring programs can also be highly effective for having a structured circulation of knowledge.

TIP: Set up a knowledge sharing forum on a reoccurring basis

Extend the network

We also need to be mindful of the extent of our knowledge networks. Without the natural pressures created by being in the same physical location, we are at risk of becoming more insular and limiting our communication to a select few who we feel comfortable with. This means our broader relationships degrade and aren't there when we need the support and insight of more remote groups.

Similarly, there is the real threat of losing "weak ties". These are the more casual ties formed in the lunchroom or the elevator with people in other teams (or even other organisations). Research has found that weak ties perform an important function in knowledge transfer by facilitating effective and quick knowledge transfer from outer parts of the ecosystem. They are much less energy intensive than stronger relationships and so are a highly efficient resource.

We can work towards building this network of weak ties in the hybrid space by hosting social events that are cross-team or even cross-organisations. These provide the perfect opportunity for forging weak ties in an informal and relaxed environment. Design the event so that there are breakout rooms with an opportunity for people to connect from different areas. For example, try playing virtual charades or an improv

game.

TIP: Think broadly when preparing invitations for virtual social events or functions and build environments of interaction

Need More Help?

Knowledge management can be complex and often requires more than just technical or IT solutions. Keen to find out more about how to recalibrate hybrid work to optimise your networks? Performance Frontiers help guide leaders and organisations put in place rituals and initiatives to get the energy (and information) flowing. Speak to Laura today about how we can partner with you to revolutionise your approach to knowledge sharing and steward your organisation into a greater, more abundant future.

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