

KNOWLEDGE AS POWER IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

BY MICHAEL TREMBLAY

"How quickly they forget" is an adage that could soon have far-reaching and ongoing implications for public sector organizations in Canada and everyone who depends on them. The issue stems from a looming wave of public sector retirements that is taking hold and is expected to swell in coming years. Studies show that in the next five years, nearly one-third of public sector workers in Canada will pack up their belongings, put on their coats and walk out the front door for the last time.

When they go, they will take with them a vast array of critical information that may not be replicated anywhere else in their organizations. To ensure that taxpayers get the most value for their dollar and the public sector organizations operate as efficiently as possible, measures to mitigate those real and extensive losses must be implemented.

One of the ways forward-thinking public sector organizations are coping is by implementing knowledge management capabilities – the systemic capture, storage, analysis and dissemination of corporate information and organizational intelligence.

Knowledge management is about enabling people to quickly and accurately access the relevant information they need so they can make the best decisions and determine the optimum course of action. Relevant information is both correct and complete. When one considers the enormous number of unstructured information sources – e-mail, corporate Intranets, the Internet, shared drives, etc. – in a public sector organization, the need to centralize, index and provide access to this information through

technologies such as portals and collaboration tools becomes apparent.

By implementing robust search capabilities and preparing to readily navigate abundant and expanding information resources – such as training course content, procedures and processes developed by experienced employees and best practices from previous projects – organizations ensure that tomorrow's employees benefit from today's expertise.

For years, software firms and others have been developing technologies to enable organizations to break down informational silos and to marry unstructured and structured information. Now, successful deployments around the world are proving that the initial vision is correct; knowledge management increases corporate efficiency and can play a central role in dramatically reducing the damaging performance and cost implications staff turnover can have on public sector organizations.

and nurturing its growth. This can be accomplished in several ways.

One provincial public sector organization in Canada recently implemented a knowledge management application tied to an enterprise portal. To get employees accustomed to the portal, the organization encouraged them to share useful "social" information such as recipes, restaurant recommendations, rental notices and listings of social events.

This drew staff into the portal and allowed them to become familiar with the system, turning the portal into a part of their day.

A more systemic challenge lies in determining ROI, which traditionally involves cost avoidance or cost-benefit analysis. But governments and public sector organizations serve many masters, and financial ROI measurements do not present a full picture of the value of government programs and services.

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Interestingly, while some segments of the public sector are embracing knowledge management, our experience is that a series of unfounded perceptions are contributing to the delay of its wider adoption. The concerns most frequently cited include fears of a lengthy and complicated implementation, employee reluctance to place information on the system and contribute to its growth, and the difficulty of assessing return on investment (ROI). However, there are many examples of successful implementations where these perceived problems were readily addressed.

In all cases, successful knowledge management roll-outs should include a communications strategy to ensure that all employees, even those not directly involved in working with the system, understand its purpose and the benefits that both the organization and the employees will gain from using it

Clearly, what is required is an ROI approach that provides a fuller picture, including the social and political value of IT investments such as knowledge management. SAP is working with the Centre for Technology in Government (CTG), located at the University at Albany in New York, to spearhead an initiative to develop "Public ROI" – a method for defining, measuring and communicating the economic, social and political returns of government IT programs. CTG is currently working with Canadian, U.S. and European government organizations to develop a public ROI model; the results of this research are to be available late in 2006. www.sap.com 064340

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