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Vermont Agency of Transportation Employee Retention and Knowledge Management Study

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Vermont Agency of Transportation Employee Retention and Knowledge Management Study

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POLICY BRIEF

Issue

Employee retention is a critical issue for organizations of all types. Public sector groups such as the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) are no exception. Not only can the costs of recruitment, training, and orientation approach 100% of the annual salary for the position being filled, but work disruption and loss of organizational memory can impact organization performance. Vermont is not alone in facing a transportation workforce challenge. A recent publication from the National Cooperative Highway Research Program for state departments of transportation stresses the importance of knowledge management (KM) in these organizations and provides guidelines for enhancing retention and talent management, two key issues to an effective workforce. As the report acknowledges, the constraints of retirements, departing mid-career employees, and the changing workplace expectations of the millennial generation all play into an organization that may face a steady decline in resilience, unless a clear plan is in place to address retention and implement KM practices. Recognizing these critical issues, VTrans leaders embraced an applied research project intended to assess the state of both retention and KM at the agency and develop pilot projects to address both areas.

Key Research Findings

Early career employees are most at risk for leaving VTrans employment. Analysis of VTrans turnover data found that except for those approaching retirement, the population most likely to leave VTrans are those under 35 years of age and within their first 8 years at the Agency. Focus group findings showed that while individuals in this group are attracted to VTrans employment

due to the substantial benefits package, job security, and breadth of career/work opportunities, they become dissatisfied due to supervisory issues, perceived low pay compared to the private sector, and lack of position-specific training.

Use of an organization-specific exit questionnaire can aid and inform retention efforts. Based on focus group findings, a standardized exit questionnaire was piloted with all resigning employees for a six-month period. Reasons for joining and leaving the Agency were similar to those shown in earlier studies, however pay was not an overriding reason for resignations. The respondents' top recommendations for steps VTrans could have taken to retain them as employees included the need for a different supervisor and "making me feel valued as an employee." The use of this questionnaire can provide VTrans with leverage points for the future and afford longitudinal tracking of retention efforts. Some questions concerning orientation and training can also be used early in an employee's tenure at VTrans to ensure formative feedback on these issues. This early input can help the organization with continuous improvement of new employee onboarding.

Knowledge sharing and transfer is happening but help is needed. A KM assessment found that VTrans employees were sharing and saving information but in a nonsystematic fashion. A survey question concerning knowledge sharing tools and processes showed agreement on the need for: clear procedures and help with knowledge selection, templates, and knowledge access. Sharing and transferring knowledge is critical to organizational resilience. (Figure 1)
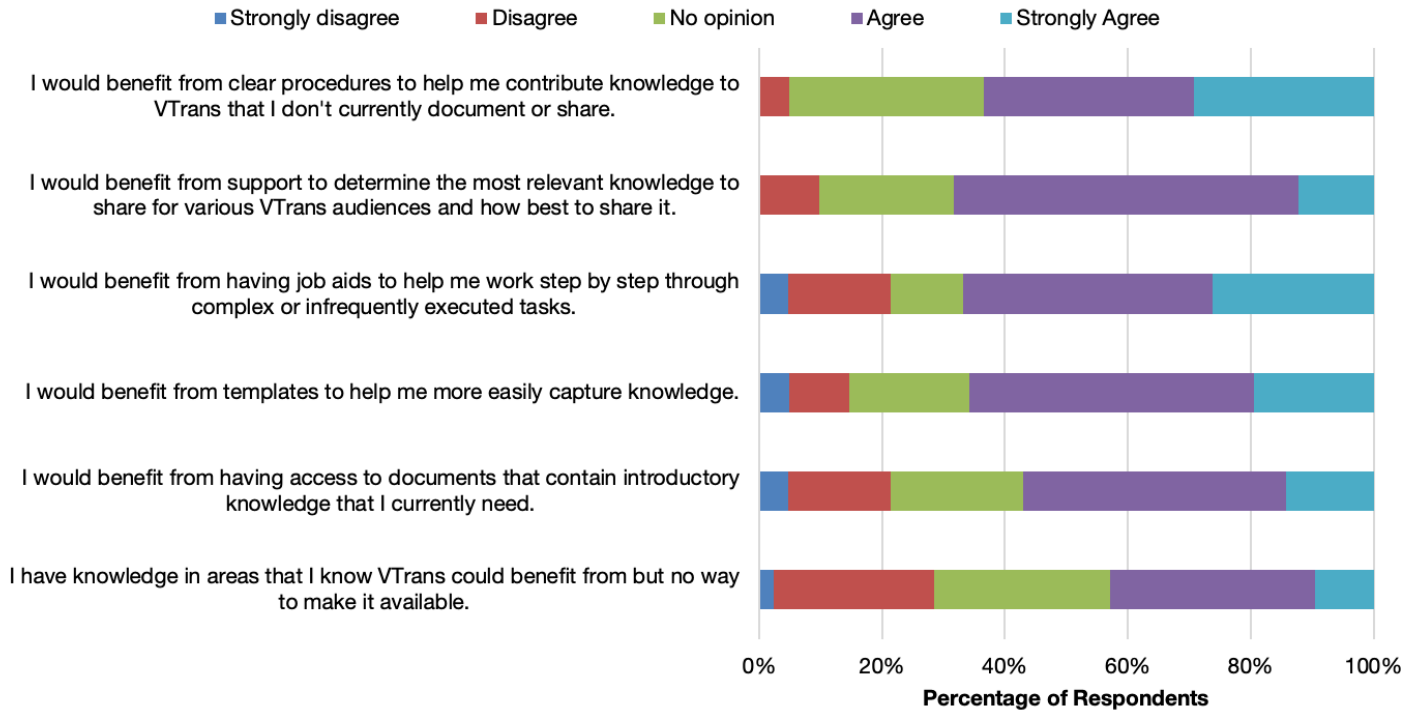
Knowledge Sharing Tools

Figure 1: VTrans Knowledge Sharing Tools (n=42)

Knowledge Management achievement depends on sharing tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is learned from personal experience, is quite nuanced, and generally is not written down. Unlike explicit knowledge, which can be obvious, concrete, empirical or recorded, tacit knowledge is difficult to transfer between employees. The pilot project developed a workshop method for helping groups of employees learn about KM, document, and then share both explicit and tacit knowledge. It was often challenging for individuals to recognize their own deep expertise or tacit knowledge. In order for KM efforts at VTrans to move forward, the organization will need to determine appropriate strategies for managing both explicit and tacit knowledge. This may include not just document archiving but also a focus on strategies such as building communities of practice, mentoring, and conducting expert interviews.

Leadership is needed for KM success. As with other aspects of organizational change, KM success will depend on leadership in VTrans. In order for KM efforts to move forward, a leadership group should be convened to spearhead KM advances and determine what strategies might be most appropriate. Finding a home for the effort and designating an individual with authority and responsibility for KM will move the project forward.

Further Reading

This policy brief is drawn from the "Vermont Agency of Transportation Employee Retention and Knowledge Management Study", a NCST research report by Glenn McRae, Carol Vallett, and Jennifer Jewiss of the University of Vermont. To download the report, visit: https://ncst.ucdavis.edu/project/assessing-vtrans-employee-retention/