

## KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER RESISTANCE OF MATURE WORKERS

<sup>a</sup>AGNIESZKA ŚLEDŹ

*Wrocław University of Economics, Komandorska 118/120, 53-345 Wrocław, Poland*  
*email: "agnieszka.sledz@ue.wroc.pl"*

**Abstract:** This article aims to identify the causes of resistance from mature workers to share knowledge with the less experienced colleagues. Due to the broad scope of the associated problems, the study focused exclusively on culturally determined barriers to knowledge transfer. In addition, the author included a design for a set of instruments to overcome such barriers in company practice. Barriers to knowledge transfer were categorized according to their association with teamwork, communication, attitude to change and the relationship of authority in the company.

**Keywords:** knowledge management, intergenerational knowledge transfer, barriers to knowledge transfer.

### 1 Introduction

Mature workers are a specific group of employees in Polish business practice. To begin with, this particular segment of the working population is already quite large and follows a rapidly growing trend. Furthermore, a large proportion of mature workers approach the retirement age or are already past the formal retirement threshold. The combined effect of those factors is that Polish companies will soon suffer the loss of a large base of experienced employees.

With each departure, companies have to bear the consequences of losing a sizeable portion of their knowledge resources; and if the departing employee is a mature worker, the upshots are particularly grave. Mature workers are typically a group of employees with long history of employment in the company. From the employers' viewpoint, their departure may result in irreparable loss, since those employees often represent unique abilities and inimitable qualifications. To alleviate the associated risks, it may be useful for companies to identify the most valuable knowledge resources in order to prevent their loss in a foreseeable future. However, this solution comes with many limitations, and those limitations are predominantly linked to the resistance of mature workers to take part in intergenerational transfer of knowledge.

This paper represents an attempt to identify the reasons for the observed resistance to share knowledge. Due to the broad scope of the associated problems, the study focuses exclusively on culturally determined barriers to internal knowledge transfer, i.e. those that are directly related to the organisational culture. In addition, the author made an attempt to postulate a set of methods and instruments that may prove effective in overcoming this type of resistance on the part of mature workers.

### 2 Cultural determinants of knowledge transfer resistance

The significance of knowledge retention is attested by the fact that – as shown in analyses – the most valuable company knowledge resources are often in the hands of the limited few of the employees (7). The key factor to be addressed in the context of designing an effective knowledge transfer strategy is to determine the scope of meaningful knowledge held by mature workers – this is a prerequisite for an effective design of the intergenerational knowledge transfer process.

The correlations between culture and the employees' propensity to share knowledge are quite profound. Culture may serve to support various activities associated with knowledge transfer, increase employee motivations to share knowledge, or even form strong convictions among mature employees of the obligation to share knowledge with less experienced colleagues. On the other hand, culture may also be a source of some of the most entrenched barriers to knowledge transfer and the reason for failures in this respect (2).

The reasons for knowledge transfer resistance on the part of mature employees may be categorised according to organisational behaviours identified as the most important factors in the context of knowledge management in organisations (3). In this study, the reasons for resistance were identified based on the responses to electronic questionnaire survey conducted among employees from companies operating in the Lower Silesia and Great Poland regions of Poland.

#### 2.1 Teamwork-related reasons for knowledge transfer resistance

Teamwork is widely considered as a fundamental form of work organisation and a prerequisite for market success. This area is attributed with such properties as belonging, group awareness, shared responsibility for common objectives, and cooperation (6). All of the above are thought to be of particular significance in the context of knowledge transfer.

Compared with their younger colleagues, mature workers are more likely to display problems in teamwork cooperation, mostly attributed to low levels of interpersonal skills. When asked for reasons for such attitudes, they often emphasise previous work experience with companies that value individual work involvement. In addition, they also report their concern that – after passing the sum of their knowledge to younger colleagues – they would be of no further use to the company. To overcome this barrier, it may be useful to emphasise the climate of trust within the organisation through long-term commitment to such values as support, good communication, mutual respect, fair treatment and predictability.

Some of the respondents made references to old age stereotypes or seemingly outdated knowledge. It appears that such perception of mature employees may hamper their motivation to share knowledge. Without proper appreciation for their input, they lack the opportunities (or the will) to share their rich and valuable knowledge with younger generations of employees.

Reasons for resistance	Suggested remedies
Low level of interpersonal skills; Lack of trust towards associates and co-workers; Perception of associates as rivals; Stereotypes and prejudices related to old age and outdated knowledge.	Training of interpersonal skills; Trust-based workplace relations; Building shared attitudes through teamwork; Rewarding the knowledge-sharing behaviours; Building proper atmosphere; Emphasis on equality.

*Source: own research based on empirical findings.*

#### 2.2 Communication-related reasons for knowledge transfer resistance

Communication involves passing of information from one person to another, and its effectiveness can be measured by the degree of correspondence between the meaning derived by the recipient and the message intended by the sender (4.). One of the most important reasons for knowledge transfer resistance in this area is the language gap. Mature employees often report their problems in understanding the language of the younger generations – particularly their ubiquitous use of English terms. On the other hand, the inexperienced employees face a similar problem of comprehending the professional jargon used by their older colleagues. To overcome this barrier, it may be useful to employ basic instruments that ensure clarity of communication messages passed between the two groups. Empathy in understanding the viewpoint of the other party, the use of questions for clarification and precision, postponing the pending decisions to ensure proper weighting of arguments – these are some of the most effective methods for improving clarity of communication exchanges (8).

The top-down approach to communication used in many companies does not form incentives for mature workers to share their knowledge, particularly with respect to information that may result in negative consequences for the sender. Employees are reluctant to share 'bad news' out of fear of reprisal from their superiors; they often voice their concern for futility of such action or think that their opinion will be flouted. This barrier can be overcome by insistence on introducing two-sided communication. At the same time, it may be useful to provide space for informal exchange of knowledge, with employees at all levels of the organisational structure and professional expertise feeling secure to freely exchange information and opinions.

Mature employees' resistance to share knowledge may also result from discrepancies in perceiving certain phenomena or problems. Such contrasting perceptions are often a product of differences in accumulated knowledge and expertise. This problem can also be addressed by the use of empathy as a method of gaining insight into the opposing viewpoints.

Another important barrier is the communication noise, i.e. any disturbances in message transmission that accompany the exchange of communication from the sender to the recipient. These include any disorganising or disorienting factors that hamper proper communication. Mature workers often report their problems in apprehension, mostly age-related. If the communication noise cannot be eliminated altogether, the problem may be alleviated by the insistence on improving message clarity (8).

Reasons for resistance	Suggested remedies
Language gaps, low quality of communication; Dominance of the top-down approach to communication; Differing perceptions; Age-related susceptibility to communication noise.	Formulation of clear and common language of exchange; Regular trainings and meetings, personnel rotation; Emphasis on clarity of communication exchange; Providing space for informal exchange of knowledge; Insistence on two-sided communication.

Source: own research based on empirical findings.

### 2.3 Power-related reasons for knowledge transfer resistance

Power in a company setting refers to potential for influencing other members of the organisation. The chances of effective influence are in proportion to the level of the recipient's dependency on the power holder (6). The respondents of this study often emphasised their fear of disturbing proper relations with their superiors. Distanced managers with propensity for autocratic behaviour may find it hard or even impossible to properly motivate their subordinates to share valuable knowledge with others.

Many respondents voiced their perceived lack of formal support for accumulation, retention, development, application and transfer of knowledge. This problem may be overcome by instilling the attitude of appreciation of knowledge and its role in effective management – particularly among the higher ranks. In a more practical dimension, it may be useful to incorporate knowledge management practices as part of the general business strategy.

The resistance to share knowledge with younger colleagues may also be related to the perception of knowledge as a source of power. Mature workers may be apprehensive that – by sharing their knowledge – they risk the chance of losing a power position that rightfully belongs to them as long-term employees with extensive experience. Another barrier emphasised in many responses was the fear that strong involvement in knowledge-sharing activities would bear the risk of revealing knowledge deficiencies in other areas, to the effect of undermining their existing power status. A good approach to eliminating this kind of barriers is to increase employees' awareness of the wide spectrum of benefits to be gained from proper management and – particularly – sharing of knowledge.

Reasons for resistance	Suggested remedies
Power distance; Lack of support for knowledge management; Perception of knowledge as a source of power; The fear of revealing knowledge deficits; The fear of making errors.	Increasing the awareness of benefits to be gained from knowledge sharing; Training of managerial skills and competences; Incorporating knowledge management as part of the company's general strategy; Emphasis on those forms of communication that best suit the knowledge transfer purposes.

Source: own research based on empirical findings.

### 2.4 Resistance associated with employees' attitude to change

Changes are a natural process and an inevitable element of company operation. The fear of changes among employees is typically a result of previous negative experiences – and long-term employees are particularly well-acquainted with the company's past problems. The resistance to change is particularly strong when the potential effects are perceived as detrimental, harmful or destructive. In anticipation of the resistance to change associated with knowledge sharing, managers should – in the first place – resolve any doubts and reservations that may arise, particularly the fear of losing their jobs to younger colleagues.

Another important reason for resistance in this respect is the fact that change may disturb previous routines and regimens. In the context of resolving the reluctance to share knowledge founded on general resistance to change, it may be useful to focus on increasing the awareness of mature workers that the intergenerational transfer of knowledge is an ambitious goal and a challenge, with good potential to elevate their existing status in the company structure.

Reasons for resistance	Suggested remedies
The fear of job loss; The need to redesign the existing routines and regimens.	Building an atmosphere of trust; Setting goals and presenting them as challenges.

Source: own research based on empirical findings.

### 3 Conclusions

The wide and ever-growing population of employees past the age of 50 represents a great challenge for managerial cadres in Polish companies. They are faced with the task of preserving and transferring valuable knowledge held by mature workers with years of experience in the field. This knowledge is often a prerequisite for retaining company market position and competitive advantage. For this reason, managers should focus on those activities that reduce the natural resistance of mature workers to share knowledge with younger colleagues. Proper recognition and elimination of the most important reasons for such resistance will not only help improve knowledge transfer processes, but also stimulate the involvement of mature workers in the ripe stage of their career development. Apart from the obvious benefit of retaining valuable knowledge, this approach may also help the company retain the services of mature workers well past the formal retirement threshold.

The mature workers' resistance to share knowledge may result from a number of factors. Cultural determinants are only a small section of the broad spectrum of potential sources of resistance. Therefore, each case should be studied and diagnosed individually, and particular attention should be paid to those cases which represent an interplay of many sources of resistance. The list of potential methods and solutions for resolving resistance to share knowledge is by no means complete. Each company faced with similar problems needs to analyse the problem in detail, and utilise the results of such analyses to identify the most effective methods of addressing the mature workers' resistance to share knowledge.

**Literature:**

1. Adair J.: Anatomia biznesu. Budowanie zespołu. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Studio EMKA, 2001. 13-16 p. ISBN 83-88607-96-0
2. Evans C.: Zarządzanie wiedzą. Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 2005. 55-57 p. ISBN 83-208-1575-4.
3. Glińska - Neweś A.: Kulturowe uwarunkowania zarządzania wiedzą w przedsiębiorstwie. Toruń: Towarzystwo Naukowe Organizacji i Kierownictwa "Dom Organizatora", 2007. 196-7 p. ISBN 978-837285-337-0.
4. Griffin R. W.: Podstawy zarządzania informacjami. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2004. 592-593 p. ISBN 978-83-01-16471-3.
5. Jemielniak D., Koźmiński A. K.: Zarządzanie wiedzą. Warszawa: Wolters Kluwers Polska, 2012. 157-160 p. ISBN 978-83-264-1590-6.
6. Olczak A., Kołodziejczyk – Olczak I. (eds.): Leksykon zarządzania. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Humanistyczno – Ekonomicznej, 2006. 83 p. ISBN 83-7405-188-4.
7. Probst G., Raub S., Romhardt K.: Zarządzanie wiedzą w organizacji. Kraków: Oficyna Ekonomiczna, 2004. 176 p. ISBN 83-88597-77-9.
8. Stoner J. A. F., Wankel C. H.: Kierowanie. Warszawa: PWE, 1992. 322-324 p. ISBN: 83-208-0861-8.

**Primary Paper Section:** A

**Secondary Paper Section:** E, H