Introduction

Knowledge Management efforts in most companies focus on the collection and organization of explicit knowledge, like documents, manuals, specifications, procedures, and research materials. Although we use the blanket term “knowledge” to represent this type of information, and “knowledge management” for the efficient use of it, most of the real knowledge in our organizations is not housed in electronic libraries. It exists "between the ears" of co-workers.

The knowledge our organizations depend on most heavily is implicit. It is the intuitive, experienced-based know-how that resides in people's heads. It is Tom's ability to conceive new moneymaking services--the magical way he pulls a new idea out of the air. To get a picture of the value of this implicit knowledge, imagine what your profits would look like if you could transfer some of Tom's skills and expertise to the rest of the product development team! And what about George's ability to troubleshoot faulty equipment and know exactly how to fix it? That's a skill you'd desperately like to teach someone else before George retires at the end of the year.

Ordinarily, neither Tom nor George is consciously aware of all that they think and do. Even if they were aware, research shows that it's very difficult for subject matter experts to explain deep insights to others. They may even have personal reasons not to share what they know. These obstacles and others make harvesting implicit knowledge a significant challenge.

Prepare.

Knowledge Harvesting is a mature process for capturing and making implicit knowledge available for transfer and use by other people--in other words, making implicit knowledge explicit.

Knowledge Harvesting involves these primary activities:

- Identify and prioritize knowledge to be harvested.
- Identify the experts who have this knowledge.
- Choose elicitors to conduct the session(s).
- Review the needs of target learners.
- Elicit knowledge through sessions.
- Collect and organize the session results.
- Conduct post-session review and follow-ups.

Identify vital knowledge.

The first step is to identify the knowledge to be transferred. Attempting to capture all of one individual's implicit knowledge is unreasonable and infeasible. Instead, select a few key areas and candidates based on the organization's critical knowledge areas.
How do you identify your most critical knowledge? Consider... What are your organization's business objectives and core competencies? What do you need to start doing or continue doing to achieve your objectives and remain competitive? What knowledge supports these strategies and objectives?

A critical knowledge area in your organization might be:

- Knowing how to manage a relationship with key customer(s)
- Knowing how to perform a key operational process
- Knowing how to use or evolve a mission-critical technology or application
- Understanding of a geographical region and its business customs as they relate to securing new contracts
- Knowing how to pick the right person for the a job, and how to assemble a productive team
- Understanding of the internal infrastructure - information about the tools, the culture, and "how to get things done around here."

If you are starting to experiment with knowledge harvesting, attempt to select a set of activities that can reasonably be accomplished in two to six hours. This will help to define a task with a manageable scope.

**Identify experts who will contribute.**

The second part of identifying critical knowledge areas is to identify the people who possess key know-how. There are several ways to do this:

- Locate expertise profiles. Check systems that map internal expertise (like company Yellow Pages, White Pages or skills and knowledge databases). Note: If you have not created a directory of people and skills, then ask KHi about our award-winning "Work Profiling" process.
- Ask stakeholders and managers in the target domain (discipline or competency area.)
- Locate work documents on the subject and find out who authored them.

After identifying the experts, collect information that will help you prepare for the session. Gather:

- Work profile, job description, performance review information or other related information about current roles and responsibilities
- Work experience (types of jobs, regions/cultures worked with), education and training
- Essential work documents
- Contact information (location, phone number, e-mail, etc.)
- Personal preferences (for setting, timing, etc.)
- Examples of email correspondence
Select people who will elicit the expertise.

Effective elicitation is crucial. There are several skills that are important in eliciting implicit knowledge. One is building rapport. Another is active listening. A third is the ability to read non-verbal communication—for example, to recognize the difference between a pause in which the contributor is thinking and has more to say, and a pause that means, “I’m done, we can move on.” This ability also helps in understanding the difference between an unwillingness to share and a difficulty with verbalizing ideas. Even more importantly, the elicitor must be able to handle either situation effectively.

The ability to consider several thoughts at the same time is also important. Elicitors must simultaneously focus, listen, reflect, filter, and lead the conversation.

Perhaps the most important quality in an elicitor is a genuine interest in the contributor and what he or she knows. People who are good at elicitation are wide-eyed curious individuals who are eager to learn new things. People who excel as elicitation have manageable egos. They don’t need to be the center of attention or to do all the talking. A good elicitor listens more than talks. And a good elicitor is OK when he or she is corrected by the subject matter expert.

In summary, the best elicitors have strong interpersonal skills, a love of learning, the ability to visualize the end product (the knowledge asset) and an understanding of the intellectual processes that target learners will use to accomplish their work.

Where do you find these people? Consider people who are skilled communicators/interviewers. Look in the Human Resources department. Consider recruiters or people with a consulting experience (especially in-depth, business process consulting). People with training and education backgrounds often make good elicitors because they typically have the interpersonal skills required, and enjoy the interaction.

Note: The characteristics mentioned above are good qualifiers for candidate harvesters. A capable harvester becomes a competent harvester after having orientation, guidance from a mentor, and lots of experience. In order to manage expectations, consider that a new harvesting consultant usually requires mentoring for the first four or five projects.

Understand the target learners’ needs.

It’s important to have a description of the people who are likely to use the information you are eliciting before you begin harvesting sessions. Determine the target learners’ level of knowledge about the process and gather an understanding of how or where the information is likely to be applied. This will help you ensure that you capture the appropriate level of detail in the sessions.

Information to collect might include:
• Expected number of users/target learners
• Physical/geographic location and cultural nuances
• Experience spread - knowledge of the process, technology or business area (i.e., one-half of the learners are highly experienced and one-half are moderately experienced)
• Circumstance/situation in which the knowledge will be applied
• Access to various kinds of performance-support media

Prepare the setting.

The setting has a significant influence on how effectively your contributor is able to tap into and articulate key knowledge. It should be conducted wherever the contributor is most comfortable. Ideally, you should work in an open, airy, naturally lit room with space for all participants to move around.

In other cases, going to the contributor can be effective. This action signifies to them that you are making a concession, that you recognize the value of their time and want them to be in a comfortable setting. Having said that, it is critically important that the session take place where the contributor will not be distracted by telephones, co-workers, or day-to-day work crises.

Environmental comforts are essential. That does not just mean a good chair and a comfortable temperature. The setting must be conducive to the thinking and communication styles of the contributor. If the person is highly visual, for example, you may need tools for enabling the contributor to communicate their information visually (flip chart and markers, for example).

If the contributor is highly kinesthetic or motor skills should be observed, they may need to meet in their work environment in order to show you how they physically interact with their work setting.

Understand the domain.

Although you don’t have to be a domain contributor, you do need to be able to converse intelligently about the topic. This means having an overall familiarity with the subject area, core constructs, and its associated terminology.

In order to prepare yourself, collect articles about the domain. Study and gain an understanding of both the content area and the person you are interviewing. Look for documents that the contributor has authored. Talk to people who work with them. Become as familiar as you can about their area of expertise and how that expertise is used in the organization.

Make a list of content and context-specific questions you will want to ask the contributor, either for further clarification or to dig into a particular area a little deeper. Before going
to the session, look over materials and try to get an idea of where you think the real nuggets of knowledge are likely to reside.

Try to find out if there are any reasons the contributor might not want to share what he or she knows, and be prepared to address these concerns (either implicitly or explicitly).

**Elicit!**

The best way to draw out and capture implicit knowledge is to conduct a face-to-face interview. Ask them to talk about what they do and to describe specific situations where they apply their unique know-how. Sounds easy enough, right?

Eliciting is both science and art--science because it uses a methodology with standard questions, art because an elicitor must build trust, rapport, and subtly guide the contributor through a process of discovery and articulation.

This section covers the primary actions of eliciting implicit knowledge through harvesting sessions:

- Build rapport
- Conduct the harvesting session
- Guide the contributor
- Follow-up

**Build rapport.**

Building rapport is something you do throughout the eliciting process - before, during, and after the session. The main objective of building rapport is to facilitate the process of externalizing and transferring implicit knowledge. A good rapport helps in two ways. First, it creates trust and credibility which makes the contributor more comfortable sharing what he or she knows. When the contributor is comfortable, he or she is more likely to provide good information. Second, rapport increases the visibility of certain common thinking processes heard during the discussion. This results in time savings and better quality of the exchange.

Two critical components of building rapport are: establishing trust and credibility, and interpreting the contributor's mental models.

In order to be effective as an elicitor, you have to be seen as credible and trustworthy. One of the ways you demonstrate your reliability is to tell the contributor up-front (the first time you meet) that you are not a professional in their field, but that you do have expertise in capturing implicit knowledge. Your background knowledge of the subject is also a key component of your credibility. If the contributor does not perceive you as trustworthy, you will not be effective.
Consider personal values and mental models.

People think and do what makes sense to them; their perceptions reflect a particular paradigm. In order to understand how they do what they do and deliver that know-how to someone else, you must capture the context, mental models, and personal values of the contributor.

You will learn about the person throughout the knowledge harvesting process by paying careful attention to the words they use to describe what they do. Begin the session by asking them to describe their background. This will provide a glimpse of the contributor's diversity of experience and give you an opportunity to ask questions that will help you discern their mental models.

For example, if a person focuses on profits, results, and the bottom line, you will hear that focus in their language. Likely as not, they will use those very words. If they value people and relationships, you’ll hear those words as well. By recognizing the language of your contributor, you can identify what’s important to them. Using those words in your questions and comments will help you save time and build rapport.

Conduct the harvesting session.

When you start, here are comments that you should make early in the conversation.

- Let her know that she has been identified by a co-worker as a contributor on this topic.
- Let her know you are here to help make the process of capturing and leveraging this knowledge easier (for her).
- Let her know that you recognize that her time is valuable and you want to take up only that which is necessary to capture key know-how.
- Provide an overview of the session process. Let her know how long it will take, how the session will be conducted, expected results, etc.
- Discuss environment issues. Ask, “Is there anything that we need in order to make our collaboration easier and more effective? Are you OK with the setting? Is it comfortable? Is there anything we could do to make it more comfortable?”
- Use a recorder to tape the conversation or enlist the support a dedicated transcriptionist. Rarely will a contributor have a problem with recording, but it is important that you ask permission in advance.

Guide and encourage.

A good elicitor subtly directs the contributor through a process of discovery and articulation. Skillfully draw out information by asking the right questions and shepherding the dialogue. You are careful not to implant ideas, make suggestions or let your personal opinions, agendas or needs impede the process. It is important to be neutral and objective throughout the harvesting process.
Eliciting is about nurturing the discussion of knowledge that the contributor has but does not know they have or can express. You (the elicitor) serve as a catalyst to spur what is “natural,” that which is inside the person’s head but has yet been spoken.

The best, and perhaps the only way to learn how to lead a session, is to practice. Through practice, you’ll become better at recognizing quickly when you’re off track and how to then gently steer the conversation back on course. You’ll also learn how to recognize the key nuggets of information and be able to drill down and draw them out.

**Capture this information!**

Some questions that you ask are general, others are specific. Among the things you'll want to collect, regardless of the topic, are:

- Process flow (this happens, then this happens)
- Relationship(s) with other people and work, to include all interfaces and hand-offs
- Documents, information or people referenced in the process (in order to know how to do this, the contributor uses these materials, resources, people, etc.)
- Systems or tools used

How do you know when you have enough information? To determine when you're done, ask, “Do I have enough information and understand the information well enough to teach someone else how to do the work?” Also, “Have you filled out all of the information within the prescribed boundaries?”

How do you know if you have the right information? Managers and stakeholders involved in the process will provide feedback. Ultimately, they will judge the validity of information gathered.

**Exercise good etiquette.**

Never interrupt. Show with your eyes and body language that you are paying attention to what they are saying. Ask later. Only interrupt the flow when a question is critical to your understanding of a particular part of the process.

Don’t make assumptions. Don’t assume you know what a word or phrase means. Ask. (Although this seems counter to item #1, it really isn’t. It means you need to know when to stop the flow and ask a question or when to save it for later).

Recognize a hostile contributor early in the process. Know when to reschedule, cancel, or go back to stakeholders and ask for guidance.

**Ask good questions.**

Ask preliminary questions.
• What would make this process easier to understand?
• What would make the process easier to accomplish?

Gain clarification and stimulate discussion.

• Describe a time when…
• What's the first thing you do?
• How do you know to do that?
• How do you know when to do it?
• How do you accomplish this work?
• What does that mean?
• What do you do next? Why?
• What usually happens?
• Can you describe a time, a specific situation, when you performed this action?
• What happens if something else is done?
• What would happen if?
• Tell me more.
• Who is responsible/involved?
• What are the interrelationships among decisions?
• Where are the hand-off points?
• Is there a specific order of steps?
• What are some common mistakes or misconceptions?
• What are the affective dimensions of this process?
• What is the most important thing to remember when you're doing this?
• What are examples of printed resources, support materials, documentation, procedures, manuals, instruction sheets, checklists… that are relevant?
• What rules are involved?
• Describe how you currently help others learn how to accomplish this work.
• What are the main obstacles that hinder learners' abilities to meet their goals and objectives?

Deal with obstacles.

As an elicitor, you are likely to face resistance from time to time. In some situations, people volunteer to be interviewed and share their knowledge. In others, they are told to do so. In either case, contributors may have a difficult time communicating what they know.

The first step is to identify the nature of resistance. Do they feel threatened? Are they fearful of losing their job or power? Is it simply a matter of not having the time? Do they see/understand the value of the exercise? Once you know “where the person is coming from,” you can begin to build rapport and overcome the resistance. Here are a few of the common reasons why people might be hesitant to share, and tips for overcoming these obstacles.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Ways to overcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “My knowledge is power. If I give it up, then I’ll lose it.” | • Provide examples (stories) of how others have shared knowledge and personally gained from it.  
• Play to their need to "hold on to knowledge" by explaining that you can share knowledge and still have it - it’s not as though you lose it when you give it away.  
• Discuss ways sharing knowledge will reward them personally. |
| “I don’t know what I know.”     | • Because you're dealing with implicit knowledge, you're likely to run into experts who don't fully understand what they know. You'll hear them say things like "I just know" or "I don't know why I do it this way, I just do it."  
• People tend to get frustrated when they can't answer your questions, so it's important that elicitors are highly skilled in asking the right questions that will help trigger the knowledge and help experts better understand and communicate it. |
| “I don’t have the time.”        | • The "I don't have time" hesitation is generally based on one or several other things: 1) the importance of the effort has not been fully communicated to the person, and 2) this type of knowledge sharing is not recognized as a part of one's job and time allocated accordingly or 3) the person doesn't see the payoff - sees bigger payoff from doing their other work.  
• As an elicitor, the best thing you can do is make the process time efficient and make sure that your contributor gets something "out" as well. You probably won't be able to influence the culture change (to one where knowledge sharing is the norm), but you can make a difference in how the contributor you’re working with feels about the experience. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Ways to overcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“What’s in it for me?”</td>
<td>• How do you deal with the “What’s in it for me question or attitude?” Simple, you answer the question. If there isn’t something in it for the contributor, and you aren’t able to articulate it, you can’t expect stellar results. The eliciting process has to be a win-win for everyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The answer to the WIIFM question also depends on the person and what’s important to them. What’s important to one person (recognition as a contributor for example) may be a negative thing to another person (who might agree to capturing the knowledge so that people leave him alone).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Know what motivates and drives the person. Present benefits from their perspective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In most situations, consider mentioning these benefits:

- Being recognized as the contributor
- Positively effect on your career and position in the company
- It’s the right thing to do - the greater good
- Minimize the situations when you are asked the same questions over and over
- Achieve financial gain
- If you share what you know, others will share what they know/have with you
- If you don’t do this, then this might happen….

**Conclusion**

This is the end of our Mini Guide! The next stage of harvesting - called the “Organize” stage - is to make sense of what you captured during harvesting sessions. More information about harvesting principles and practice can be found on the www.knowledgeharvesting.org and www.knowledgeharvesting.com sites. Also, hundreds of ‘pages’ of detailed guidance about how to elicit can be licensed as part of KHi’s Knowledge Harvesting system.

**Credits**

Copyright, 2008, Knowledge Harvesting, Inc.

Mini Guide authors: Larry Todd Wilson, Pamela Holloway, Benjamin Miller

Knowledge Harvesting is a registered trademark of Knowledge Harvesting Inc.  
http://www.knowledgeharvesting.com/
**Terminology**

In order to help you establish a common language, here is a starter set of terms.

**Elicit** = To elicit means to effectively guide a contributor through the process of saying what he or she knows about a particular topic.

**Elicitor** = The elicitor is the other half of the Knowledge Harvesting session. The elicitor prompts, guides, and excavates the hidden knowledge shared by the contributor.

**Expressed (explicit) knowledge** = Expressed knowledge is knowledge that has been written down or recorded in some way.

**Contributor / expert** = A contributor is someone who willingly shares his or her implicit knowledge.

**Implicit knowledge** = Implicit knowledge is the know-how and contextual cues that reside in the heads of top performers. It is the knowledge that was previously believed to be incapable of articulating. Via Knowledge Harvesting, it can now be written down (and therefore, shared with others).

**Knowledge asset** = A knowledge asset is a digital set of guidance and support information.

**Knowledge Harvesting** = Knowledge Harvesting is the systematic method for helping smart people express what they know. During Knowledge Harvesting, we elicit implicit knowledge, then organize and leverage it across the organization.

**Session** = A session is a scheduled meeting in which the elicitor and the contributor work towards articulating the know-how that will serve as the content of a knowledge asset.

**Tacit Knowledge** = Tacit knowledge is knowledge that cannot be written down.

**Target Learner** = A target learner is someone who uses a knowledge asset to learn and actually accomplish the work (simultaneously).