

Study examines workplace risk of losing baby boomers' expertise

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Many organizations are under prepared for the loss of valuable knowledge as the oldest members of the baby boomer generation near retirement.

PhD research by Victoria University graduate Dr Carmel Joe suggests that few organisations have systems for identifying older experts or retaining their expertise after they retire.

Within 10 years, the Department of Labour predicts that 25 per cent of New Zealand's workforce will be over 55 years of age and, says Dr. Joe, fewer young people are coming through to replace them.

"[Generation X](#) (those born between 1964 and 1981), is only 75 per cent of the size of the baby boomer cohort. The [workforce](#) is also expected to grow more slowly after 2016."

Dr. Joe describes herself as a "young baby boomer" and says her PhD research topic grew out of observations she made while working in the public service and as an IT and management consultant.

"I was meeting a lot of senior executives with specialised [knowledge](#) and a great deal of wisdom and experience who were nearing [retirement age](#). In bigger organizations, such as some [banks](#) and [government agencies](#), it's not uncommon for the majority of the senior management team to be near the end of their careers.

"Another prompt was coming across instances where people had been made redundant but were later re-hired because the organisation needed their knowledge and hadn't been able to replace it."

Dr. Joe says organisations can invest heavily in systems to capture, manage and share knowledge but these are not generally being used to gather and store the knowledge of older experts.

"Some aspects of a job can be documented but not everything. When I asked people what they would do if an expert in their team disappeared tomorrow, most replied that they'd have all the materials that person had generated but not the added element of the tacit knowledge they hold in their head.

"Experts become very attuned and intuitive about what to do and what not to do but it's knowledge that is hard to define or write down. They also have a lot of referential knowledge—they know where to go to find things out."

As part of her research, Dr. Joe 'shadowed' an expert in a sole charge position providing technical advice through a help desk.

She says while he was a highly valued staff member, few people understood exactly what he did, and analysing his job and how he went about it made his skills and knowledge more evident.

"This process is useful if you want to train someone else to do the job or to understand why a person is successful at their job, and what expertise and skills they have that you want to retain or encourage others to develop."

Dr. Joe has created a model that organisations can use to identify the knowledge held by older experts and integrate it in to their knowledge

retention processes. She now aims to work with organisations that want to identify and retain expertise in a sustainable way.

Provided by Victoria University

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