



# 3 Ways Knowledge Sharing Can Empower Agency Staff to Streamline

Atlassian Resource



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Open up your agency culture to ensure mission success

The first day at a new organization, on a new functional team, or project can be a whirlwind of details. Each answer to a question seems to create three more questions, and everyone else just seems to know everything. Long-time employees – you’re not immune either. You can be at an agency for years and yet, with a big program or policy shift, feel like a stranger in a strange land all over again.

When an agency has a habit of keeping information tucked away in departmental siloes, archived in paper documents, or held tightly in the brains of long-term staff, this makes it hard for both new staff and veterans. A culture full of walls slows down projects, forces staff into frequent and frustrating knowledge searches, and eats up the time of experts who have to answer the same questions over and over and over.

Without a way to store and access information they need across departments, divisions and functions, personnel end up stumbling around in the dark. In a survey for the American Management Association, 36 percent of staff said that they “hardly ever” know what’s going on in their organization. Fifty-five percent said they only know what’s going on “some of the time.”

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Essentially, having a bunch of knowledge siloes spread throughout the agency wastes a lot of time – and consumes often scarce agency resources.

### What is knowledge sharing?

We should probably define knowledge sharing before we get into the details of why it’s a good thing. Knowledge sharing is the exchange of information or understanding between people, teams, communities, or organizations. It’s a proactive and intentional act that expands the number of stakeholders in the know while also creating or building an accessible archive of knowledge for others.



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If you're writing a policy or specification, presenting project milestones, mentoring staff, or just having an informal chat with your team, you're sharing knowledge. Knowledge sharing helps workers and agencies be more agile, adaptable, and flexible to meet critical mission objectives and ensure overall continuity of operations in any event.



## 3 bad habits that hinder knowledge sharing (and the fixes)

People working within department or division siloes may often have trouble letting go of their best-kept secrets. Watch out for these habits that might bring knowledge sharing to a screeching halt at your agency. Be sure to proactively model the behaviors you want to see instead.

### Habit: Knowledge Stockpiling

**The harm:** Knowledge is power, and power is job security. Over time, however not sharing the knowledge behind decisions and policies, at all levels can lead to bureaucratic processes and redundant workflows. Staff spend valuable time completing forms and following complex rules, because that is the way things have always been done. Some staff may be hesitant to give up some of these processes because they feel they make them indispensable or irreplaceable. However, having them completing tasks that no longer provide benefit, holds them back from learning new skills and developing further.

**The fix: Create an agency-wide culture of efficiency.** Empower staff to find ways to simplify and streamline their own workflows. Tie performance goals to identifying workflow redundancies and recommending ways to make work more efficient. Many agencies have made efficiency a part of their overall strategic objectives. The next step is to incorporate it down throughout each division, empowering the staff who know their workflows best, to share their knowledge and unlock productivity.

### Habit: Favoritism

**The harm:** Who are the most celebrated? Who leads most discussions? An organization built around "rock stars" discourages others from feeling they can open up.

**The fix: Spread the love.** Recognize that there are members of your team or division who hold vast knowledge, who may not be most vocal or may be in roles that don't provide much exposure. Yet, they could be your organization's best leaders. Help them boost their confidence and collaboration by directly asking for their thoughts or asking them to take the lead on a project. Provide them an opportunity to share what they know.

### Habit: Reliance on the go-tos

**The harm:** Do you ever say, "I don't know what we'd do without so-and-so"? That's a problem. While So-and-so may be proud to be the agency's walking [wiki](#), it's a burden to have to answer the same questions constantly. These interruptions make your expert less capable of doing even more great work. If they decide to move on or retire, all that knowledge goes with them.

**The fix: Build your bench.** Some organizations make it part of everyone's job to mentor another staff member, and even go so far as to tie performance evaluations, merit increases, and promotions to success in passing on knowledge. This way, more than just one brain knows how you do as a team or organization. Creating a program like this may be a big cultural shift. You can start small, maybe documenting what your go-to experts know. (We'll tell you how in a bit.)

## If you build it, they will contribute

For this and so many other good reasons, knowledge-sharing systems are an important tool for keeping your entire agency in the loop.

When people share what they know, your agency, divisions and teams can collect all kinds of useful content. This knowledge-sharing system will soon be jam-packed with everything from FAQs and product troubleshooting tips, to high-level documents about agency strategic goals and mission objectives.

With total transparency, teams can easily find and communicate relevant information. Not only does it connect the right people to the right content, it cultivates an agency culture that shares wins, losses, and lessons. By shining a light, rather than assigning blame to mistakes or disappointments, whether implementation projects that were unsuccessful, or low scores on an agency benchmark – all employees benefit.



## Some knowledge on types of knowledge

Now that you've gotten real with the state of your agency's collaborative culture, understand the different types of knowledge you will want to capture. By placing these insights into separate buckets, you'll have a better sense of how to capture them. (We'll tell you how to get started too.)

**Tacit knowledge.** It's one thing to be told that a stove is hot and quite another to get that lesson while running to the ER after placing your hand on it. Some things you just have to figure out by doing – that's tacit knowledge. Think about how much we pick up just going about our day-to-day jobs. It's the most valuable information to have, and the toughest to pin down. You don't know what you don't know until you need to know.

**Capture it:** Harnessing all the operational knowledge inside the heads of your staff is hard, and not a perfect science. But there's hope. You can recruit an interviewer who can ask deep-dive questions of your long-term employees, document their answers, and store them in a best practices hub within your knowledge-sharing system.

That was a lot of words. Here's how this might play out. Vernon is one of your top IT technicians who

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has been maintaining and updating a key agency system for many years. He always manages to resolve issues quickly and get the system back up and running, no matter how dire the issue. How is he doing this?

Have an interviewer sit with Vernon to learn what is beyond technical specifications or trouble-shooting guide. What are the special things that Vernon is doing to diagnose and solve issues quickly? What are some of the quirks with the system that keep him up at night? Throw him some scenarios and see what he comes up with. Gather up his answers and share them broadly in your [knowledge-sharing system](#), [Intranet](#), or [internal wiki](#) and encourage everyone to use it so we don't all lose it. (Bonus: Vernon will feel incredible and may be more proactive with sharing his approaches in the future and/or encourage others to do so too.)

Here's one way we gather tacit knowledge at Atlassian. “We have something that we like to call conversation guides,” explains Wall. “We'll sit on a call with the person who just knows this stuff to their bones and write down every single thing that that person asked the end user, every single phrase, and all of the concepts. Then we try to formulate it into something that other people can use, so that they get that base level of knowledge without having had to live in those shoes for 15 years.”

**Explicit knowledge.** Also known as “codified knowledge,” this is information that has moved out of the brain and into written or audio form. It's now available for mass access and consumption. It's the stuff you likely already have ready to go, such as the

personnel handbook and technical specifications, or how the heck to get that printer to stop jamming.

**Capture it:** Good job on preserving these important assets in some documented form. Now make sure they're findable and current, so that they deliver long-term value. You can't really blame the technical team for testing the wrong procedure, if that's what they found in your files.

Skip the shared drives (which can be a document black hole) and bring on a solution that makes updating and sharing knowledge easy and fast. Tools like [Confluence](#), an open platform for creating, sharing, commenting on, and archiving all content, can help.

**Implicit knowledge.** These are the unwritten how-to's of the agency that originate in the processes and routines of the everyday. These tidbits turbocharge you into getting things done smoothly and efficiently – and appropriately within your agency's corporate culture. "It lives in how you run the [organization]," says Wall. "It's what everyone knows."

It's the difference between creating a project plan in Google Slides when the agency culture prefers [Trello](#) boards. It shows newcomers how to function as they ramp up on their work function and saves them from having to ask questions like whether it's ok to Slack the boss after 5 or if anyone minds if you turn off your camera during video conference calls.

**Capture it:** This one is a toughie since a lot of the "how we do" details stem from living and breathing the agency culture and infusing it every email, project, and presentation. Your agency strategic goals and overall mission statement can serve as

high-level guidelines of what everyone should put first in their day-to-day interactions. You also want to grab and share specific ways of working that can trip people up.

One way to do this is to survey your personnel asking "What about the way our teams work did you wish you knew on day one?" and gather feedback. Then consolidate the answers into a best practices doc that you can then share broadly to new hires as well as current employees.



## Now that you know what you know about knowledge-sharing

Knowledge sharing isn't a one and done; it needs to be embedded into the fiber of your agency so that valuable information doesn't vaporize, become locked in silos, or disappear when legacy staff retire or move on to their next adventure.

You might think that you're all set up to keep operational knowledge forever and ever, but take an honest look and see if your agency culture encourages employees to keep their cards close to their chests. Run through the practices we've talked about, but equally important, see how you can model the change you want to see.

Here's some homework: have thoughts about how to improve the knowledge sharing practices in your agency? Share them (and this article, why not?) with your team right now and kick off the dialogue. Go, go!

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