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CAREER COACH

Ideas: employees' best-kept secrets

A new study says employees have many reasons for hesitating to share knowledge, writes workplace reporter VIRGINIA GALT

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Many of us withhold valuable knowledge at times -- especially from our bosses -- because we fear our ideas will be shot down, ignored or appropriated by someone else who will go on to claim the credit.

These fears are not unfounded, according to research to be presented next week at the University of Toronto.

The "considerable informal learning" that occurs on the job generally goes unrecognized and unrewarded in Canadian workplaces, reported Robin Millar, executive director of the Winnipeg-based Centre for Education and Work.

"Ultimately, in some workplaces, learning is secretive or hidden," she wrote in a study prepared for a three-day U of T conference on the future of learning and work.

"Indeed, in workplaces where informal learning is neither supported nor recognized by the employer, employees [have] developed secretive learning systems to ensure that the information shared amongst employees went undetected by their employer."

Employees at all levels, from shop floor to the executive suite, have found that it does not always pay to share all the information we have acquired on the job -- and most of them hold back a little, in the interests of self-preservation, Ms. Millar said in an interview this week.

"The extent to which we are motivated to share the knowledge that we have with our workmates, managers and others . . . is really conditioned by the extent to which we feel comfortable that the knowledge is going to be recognized and rewarded," said U of T professor David Livingstone, who is leading a research project on lifelong learning and work.

"A lot of workers frankly, at this point, don't feel that."

So when should you share information -- and when is it prudent to hold back?

That all depends on where you work, said organizational psychologist Rebecca Schalm of Toronto-based consulting firm RHR International Ltd.

Does your organization recognize and promote people who collaborate and contribute to the success of others -- or is it a place where "everyone is out for oneself?"

In a competitive environment, where the highest pay goes to those who bring in the most business, or where office politics are particularly intense, you might want to keep some of those promising leads to yourself -- as long as you don't use that information to deliberately sabotage your rivals, she said.

"There are some people who can use it as a bit of a gotcha. They can be sitting in a team meeting where they actually know the answer to something, they have a piece of information . . . and it isn't until things unfold, quite far down the road, that they pull it out of their back pocket," Dr. Schalm said.

"This can build resentment among your teammates. They don't trust you. They are uncertain when you walk into the room whether you are going to sabotage them."

And such behaviour can backfire. Increasingly, she said, promotions to the executive ranks are going to those who share information and work collaboratively for the overall good of the organization.

Nonetheless, Prof. Livingstone said he has seen a number of cases where career-climbing supervisors have appropriated concepts developed by their employees and passed the ideas off as their own.

Understandably, those employees will be less likely in the future to propose ideas that could improve the way their organizations operate, he said.

In her research, conducted in 12 workplaces in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Ms. Millar also found employees who complained of the opposite problem: Managers rejected employee ideas because they hadn't thought of them themselves.

More often, however, the knowledge is not even brought to the attention of the managers, she said.

"Workers maintain a greater sense of perceived control of their work situation, work spaces and work relationships if their learning remains a secret," she said.

Sometimes, if a work group has found a better way of doing a job, it's easier to "get on with it" than to run it by several layers of management to get permission.

In other cases, employers have a set way of doing things, and employees who devise more efficient processes could find themselves running afoul of company policy.

"Workplaces that foster secretive learning are missing opportunities for engendering effective and smart workplaces," Ms. Millar wrote in her research paper.

Dr. Schalm said employees "will tend to shut down" if their attempts to share new knowledge are rejected or ignored or where an idea they have pitched in a meeting is later picked up by a colleague who is praised by the boss for coming up with the idea.

"It happens all the time and you want to say, 'Hey, that was my idea.' It can be very frustrating. Some people need that recognition," Dr. Schalm said.

"Where the work situation is not ideal, where you are not feeling respected, where the team isn't getting along, people are likely to withhold information.

"There is a bit of resentment, a bit of 'I'll show you' and that obviously isn't very helpful," Dr. Schalm said.