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## Knowledge management: A U.S. Social Security Administration case study

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### Abstract

Knowledge management can be a powerful tool for addressing the “graying of government” and other factors contributing to the loss of expertise in government organizations. This paper presents a case study of knowledge management at the U.S. Social Security Administration and provides recommendations for how knowledge management might better protect valuable knowledge resources. A two-phase study was conducted of the Benefit Rate Increase/Premium Amount Collectible (BRI/PAC), a core process at the U. S. Social Security Administration, where critical knowledge is at risk of being lost. The study suggests that knowledge sharing, training, and the overall development of a working environment conducive to knowledge management promise to enhance performance of the BRI/PAC operation, at SSA. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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### 1. Introduction

In its broadest sense, knowledge management (KM) is the ability to leverage intellectual capital (knowledge) for achieving organizational goals. Organizations are realizing that their true strength lies in the intellectual capital of their employees. According to the front page article, “Agencies Create CKO Posts to Get into the Know,” of the November 8, 1999 issue of *Government Computer News*, government agencies are starting to develop knowledge management initiatives and strategies (Date, 1999). Furthermore, *The Washington Post* recently completed a six-part series of articles, titled “Empty Pipeline: The Federal Employment Crisis,” chronicling the people shortage facing the Federal government. This shortage will be driven by retirements, early retirements, a lack of qualified people to move up and fill positions left vacant

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after retirements, and hiring freezes (Barr, 2000; Silverman, 1999). The result will be an overwhelming loss of knowledge and experience in the Federal government. Knowledge management can mitigate the impending shortage by capturing the expertise of employees before they leave the government so that their expertise can be reused in the future.

Knowledge cannot easily be defined. In the past, there have been two traditions for thinking about knowledge as well as more recent attempts to integrate the two streams of thought (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The first is rationalism, which sees knowledge as something to be obtained deductively via some mental process, and the second is empiricism, which sees knowledge as something to be obtained inductively via experience. The notion of integrating these two traditions in defining knowledge is seen in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, where thought (rationalism) and action (empiricism) relate interactively (Dewey, 1929).

As it cannot be easily described, there are numerous definitions of knowledge in the literature. Two examples aligned with pragmatism are those of Davenport and Prusak who state that knowledge “is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information,” (1998, p. 2–5) and Van Krough et al. who state that knowledge “encompasses the beliefs of groups or individuals, and it is intimately tied to action” (2000, p. 27).

In addition to defining knowledge, knowledge is typically classified as either tacit or explicit. This distinction draws on Polanyi’s (1975, 1962) work on tacit knowledge and has been popularized by Nonaka (1994, 1991) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). *Explicit knowledge* is that which has been codified and expressed in formal language. It can be represented, stored, shared, and effectively applied. *Tacit knowledge* is that which is difficult to express, represent, or communicate. Nonaka and Takeuchi argue that knowledge can be converted from tacit to explicit and vice versa. The social interaction between these two types of knowledge leads to the creation of new knowledge and innovation. Thus, KM works to leverage both types of knowledge. Additionally, knowledge flows, channels for distribution and sharing of knowledge, and use of knowledge for improving the organization’s bottom line are some of the key aspects of KM.

A U.S. Social Security Administration case study is presented and used to outline future directions for addressing this “people crisis.” The next section provides an overview of knowledge management. After that, the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA) case study is presented and results are analyzed. Conclusions are given in the last section. As a single case study, the findings from this paper are directly applicable only at SSA. However, the study does provide insights for directions in which KM might proceed in other government organizations.

## 2. Knowledge management

As mentioned above, KM is the ability of an organization (or group of partnered organizations) to leverage intellectual capital. While the underlying tenets of KM are not new, formalized approaches are a fairly recent phenomenon. The problem with outlining current KM practice is that there are a number of ways in which KM is practiced, and, in fact, different approaches may be “best” depending on the specific organization under consideration. There has been some work that suggests an array of building blocks for KM from which some may be sampled to build

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