

# Perceptions of Continuity Management in an Irish Semi-state Organisation

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on an exploration of continuity management (CM) in a large Irish semi-state organisation in transition. Drawing on interviews with ten of the senior management team, findings are presented in terms of intellectual capital, replacement strategy, information sources, knowledge transfer to successors, tacit knowledge, CM systems, and barriers to CM implementation. There is a clear consensus in favour of introducing a CM system—but also clear recognition of the barriers, such barriers perceived to be mainly cultural.

**Keywords:** continuity management; knowledge management; culture

## 1. Introduction

This practitioner oriented paper draws on an exploration of continuity management (CM) within a large Irish semi-state organisation (referred to in this paper as Semstate) that is entering a period of transition. Whereas knowledge management (KM) generally refers to attempts to identify, capture and share know-how that is perceived to be valuable throughout an organisation (Edvinsson and Malone, 1997; Field, 2003), CM refers to “the efficient and effective transfer of critical operational knowledge—both explicit and tacit, both individual and institutional—from transferring, resigning, terminating or retiring employees to their successors” (Beazley *et al.*, 2002: *xiv*). The empirical component is based on ten in-depth interviews with members of Semstate’s senior management group.

Overall the main findings reported here suggest that CM does have a role to play in both KM and human resource management and development (HRM and HRD). There is a clear consensus in favour of introducing a CM system in Semstate—but also clear recognition of the barriers, such barriers perceived to be mainly cultural. The structure of the paper is as follows: in section 2 we present a very brief review of some relevant CM literature allied to a brief description of the research context and methodology; the main findings of interest are then presented and discussed; finally, we conclude that CM has an important role to play in designing, implementing and maintaining any broad KM strategy linked to the HRM/HRD strategy.

## 2. Context, literature and method

Semstate is set to lose almost one third of its senior management staff, and one seventh of its general workforce, over the next five years. This fact alone has the potential for major discontinuity in the “upper echelons”, but it also provides a suitable site for CM oriented research. Based on the literature reviewed a decision on semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for interview outline) with members of the senior management team was deemed to be an appropriate research strategy in accessing the “perceived reality” (Henriksen *et al.*, 2004) of Semstate’s “upper echelons”. Ten interviews (representing almost one third of the senior management group) were conducted in early 2004, recorded and transcribed generating ~40,000 words.

The CM literature (Beazley *et al.*, 2002; Field, 2003) suggests that there are advantages to be gained from implementing a CM system but that there are also significant barriers. The advantages of CM may be listed as follows: speeds up orientation and settling in of new or newly promoted employees; facilitates knowledge creation and innovation; results in better decision making; preserves knowledge networks; places emphasis on identifying job-critical knowledge; may prevent knowledge hoarding; and, increases long term organisational effectiveness. Barriers include the attitude of knowledge workers to skill acquisition, the bargaining power of workers with transferable skills and the implications of both these aspects for reward structures. A knowledge-sharing

friendly organisational culture is deemed crucial to the success of CM but is one of the most difficult factors to achieve. Further, CM needs to be aligned with the intellectual capital (IC) of both the organisation and its employees, including the human, social, internal and external aspects of IC. This IC focus is broader than individualistic human capital theory and highlights the importance of both internal and external networks to CM, and indeed to KM (Bontis, 1998; Edvinsson and Malone, 1997; O'Donnell, 2004; Sveiby, 1997).

CM may also be viewed as a continuation of a long stream of research on succession planning, particularly CEO (chief executive officer) succession. Canella and Lubatkin (1993) note the distinction between the 'adaptive' and 'inertial' views of succession, which can also be applied to senior managerial succession. From the adaptive perspective senior management favour external recruitment when performance is poor or the organisation is in crisis as "outsiders are perceived to be more capable of changing the mission, objectives and strategy ... than are insiders (p. 764)". In contrast, the inertial perspective suggests that selection processes are likely to be relatively unadaptive due to the number of people and vested interests involved (Child, 1972). Large organisations tend to resist change (Henriksen *et al.*, 2004), cling to outdated strategies and administrative forms and resist outsider selections (Canella and Lubatkin, 1993).

### 3. Findings and discussion

Seven broad themes were identified in the preliminary analysis of the interview transcripts presented here: perceptions of intellectual capital; replacement strategy; information sources; knowledge transfer to successors; tacit knowledge; CM system; and finally, barriers to CM implementation.

#### 3.1 Intellectual Capital

A short questionnaire on the dimensions of intellectual capital (following O'Donnell *et al.*, 2003) was completed by each respondent. The perceived value of organisational IC in Semstate is ~70 per cent. Respondents were also asked to distribute 100 points between Human, Internal and External dimensions of IC with reference to their perceptions of *their*

*own* IC. Averages are almost half (46%) human capital and an approximately even percentage on internal (28%) and external (26%) dimensions. The tentative finding here, in terms of the relevance of IC to CM, is that these senior managers perceive half their IC to be personal human capital, with the other half more or less equally divided between internal and external forms of capital—areas of Semstate IC that new external recruits would not be expected to have. This suggests that we take a broader view on CM than on merely human capital—and take both internal and external knowledge sources/networks into consideration. Knowledge and experience of the internal organisation and links to external clients, customers and other institutional connections are critical components in any CM strategy.

#### 3.2 Replacement strategy

The age profile and impending loss of IC was well signposted in recent years but little action was taken to guard against this loss. Eight noted that managers leaving were not easily replaced from inside and that such promotions had become difficult. One stated the opposite; and another stated that it depended on the job. There have been quite a number of promotions in the recent past and this resulted in "the well being pretty dry" and a view that "we have promoted to management level as much as we can at the moment". A number of reasons were put forward to explain this including the fact that Semstate currently has a policy that all management posts are generic leading to generic job descriptions. The contention was that prospective external candidates don't really know what they are applying for—"You advertise for an assistant regional manager. What does that mean?"

Another respondent, from a very 'adaptive' perspective, stated that at least 50 per cent of new managers should be recruited externally. Two of the senior managers expressed the view that it depended on the management post—"There are some people who are super in some management functions and some who are dreadful in others". Some positions could be easily filled from inside because:

*In some areas there will be a number of people who will be very close to each other in*

*terms of what they do and how they do it ... A lot of experience of the departing person will have been acquired. There would be other jobs, I suspect, where experience, knowledge and know-how would be more important than others. You can't package (those) and hand them to someone.*

*At the younger level, now that we have started all the development...(we are) more serious about the type of development that the staff are undertaking.... I think they have the where-with-all to do it now.*

Semstate has a very strong culture, a culture that has grown up around historic HR policies that involved recruiting only from within for management grades. Semstate very rarely recruited externally, except for specialist posts such as IT or finance. Various agreements with the trade unions also tended to marginalise external recruitment. With regard to recruiting externally all respondents, bar one, expressed the view that this would pose some difficulties—evidence of internal 'inertia' emanating from historic institutionalised norms and practices. Most mentioned a large learning curve as a difficulty with external recruitment and that this might in turn lead to gaps in services to clients. Of greater concern was the ability of such new managers to "have credibility and fit in".

*If you promote people from within you are obviously getting a certain amount of continuity but if you take people from the outside, you may lose some of your services ... but having said that ... you may get new ways of doing things and you may actually improve your services.*

*New talent and new blood is needed...new ways of doing things and new ideas... and the best way of getting that is to go outside and get them.*

*The biggest... handicap for people coming from outside. What do [they] know about Semstate? I've been here for*

*20 years! There is a view that Semstate is Semstate and nobody else can know anything about it except Semstate people. This is nonsense actually.*

*If the right people were recruited from outside they would bring new thinking and ideas and no baggage.*

Another aspect concerned the competencies needed by managers to do their jobs. Five noted that Semstate had too high an emphasis on academic development, with many having availed of its generous staff development policies over the years—but much of this is perceived to be overly "academic" and not backed up by experience in external business or industry—leading to a lack of experience as one of the principal reasons for present internal promotional difficulties. This is the difference between learning "to be", being actively engaged in the practice in question (Brown and Duguid, 2000: 128), and learning "about". There is a clearly articulated need here for the "local, relevant, current, modifiable and effective" type of "hands on knowledge" (Beazley *et al.*, 2002: 211) that, apparently, has not been passed on from retiring Semstate managers to up and coming others leading to a promotional void—the type of adverse outcome that CM is supposedly designed to guard against.

### 3.3 Information sources

With one exception, those interviewed stated that their main information sources were internal networks of one form or another including peers and "the grapevine"—strong support for the internal capital dimension of IC or indeed social capital. Other sources were the Intranet, e-mails, policies and the internal management information systems (MIS), as well as external networks (external capital), contacts built up over years and current literature. Knowing who to contact and when, and "feedback" from the ground were regularly mentioned as key information sources.

*Meeting people on the floor and talking to staff.*

*Being inquisitive enough to ask a lot of questions.*

*Talking to clients and customers.*

*Wear out two pairs of shoes every year. Walk the streets, driving around is no good. Talk to people.*

*I've been around Semstate long enough to know a lot of people so if I hear rumblings of anything happening I ring up and directly ask what's happening.*

Most viewed the internal person-to-person contact as the chief means of getting the information/knowledge needed to do their jobs. The social side of organisations has a crucial role to play in KM; these experienced senior managers certainly know the value of such information and are very clear about how and where to get it. In terms of CM the location of specific organisational memories is a key point. For example, who knows about a particular issue or process? Who has been through it before? In CM terms, this is one area where new recruits to senior managerial grades, particularly if recruited externally, would be expected to require some social mentoring as their knowledge of internal capital and Semstate culture would be minimal.

### **3.4 Knowledge transfer to successors**

Interviewees were asked for the three most important things (in knowledge terms) that they would highlight to their successors in order to help them to succeed. In general, the respondents believed that the technical knowledge required to do the job was a “given”—taken for granted. Six referred to the importance of knowing the right people to contact at the right time, which links to the previous discussion on internal and social capital, and knowing where to find information. Other suggestions centred around the areas of personal integrity and talking and listening to colleagues and peers. A number of respondents saw themselves sitting down with their successor and:

*Saying right, this is where we are in relation to this.... this is what we are trying to do...these are the barriers to success...this is what we are trying to get around.... watch this.... watch that person...This is what you are*

*going to have to take account of in dealing with it.*

*These are the things you need to watch out for, if you want that read, take this slant, otherwise it will be ignored.*

Other advice involved talking to people who had done some good work for Semstate over the years and also finding out who “the fumlbers” were and identifying the “key performers”. “Listening to what people were saying” and talking to others – as individuals and through networks in order to find out what was happening and how things were done permeated these interviews. If most of the information needed to do the job comes from knowing who to contact and when, we begin to get a picture of how difficult it might be for an external recruit to fit in, particularly in the early stages.

*You have to listen to what people are saying and you have to address what people are saying. You don't have to always agree...cultivate your network.... Get out there and talk to people formally and informally or whatever. It only takes a few minutes and it really is important to scan the environment, the horizon and see where things are coming from and what's going to happen.*

*I suppose the key point I'd try to get across to them would be from the client's point of view...Generate a sense of empathy with the client in trying to help them solve their particular problems.*

All referred in some way to the importance of getting to know “how things are done around here”—internal or structural capital, which is particular, contextual and normative—and probably at least a quarter of Semstate's IC. There is a strong sense from these interviews that Semstate has “a way of doing things”—“there is only one way of doing things and that is the way we are doing it now”—“we don't want change”. The desire on the part of these senior managers to recruit externally may arise from a wish to break up this culture and to get some “new ways” of doing things and have them accepted or institutionalised over time—perhaps using external recruitment strategically for this

purpose. There is a long history in Semstate of protracted and difficult industrial relations negotiations concerning change. Change can be slow, yet Semstate is in transition, is changing; indeed, must change. One can also sense a certain impatience in many of those interviewed who wish to speed up the pace of change and to get results more quickly.

### 3.5 Tacit knowledge

The respondents believed, on average, that at least half and probably more of the knowledge needed to do their jobs was “in their heads”, that is, it was not written down anywhere—it was tacit. Some believed the percentage to be much higher with figures of 75 per cent to 80 per cent being quoted. All were asked if they personally were doing anything to codify their own knowledge. Four of ten had some kind of system in place. In the case of two of the four, this was informal. In one of the other two cases there was extensive written material about various programmes and agreements—this history had been collected and maintained over a considerable number of years. The other instances involved both specific cases and also more general negotiations, discussions and agreements.

Five of these senior managers mentioned, however, that they were conscious of the fact that they were being observed in some way as they worked; in meetings, during negotiations, handling various situations as they arose, and so on. Their strong opinion was that there was quite an amount of informal learning going on, even though it was not labeled as such. In all cases, such learning was happening within a close-knit group and was very specific—evidence of a type of informal community of practice (CoP). CoPs are ideal vehicles for the promotion and transfer of learning for continuity purposes, between novices and experts as well as amongst experts (Beazley *et al.*, 2002; O'Donnell and Porter, 2003). Most, however, referred to the fact that this knowledge was not written down anywhere:

*...it is certainly not in the procedures...it comes from experience. You can't buy it.*

*You have a Job Spec. But that's as far as it goes. A lot of the way we do our job is*

*having learnt it...good experience and broad understanding. That's how we do it – in the head.*

*You've heard it before and you know...what way it's going to go... how it's going to fall for you.... you know how to react.*

Eight referred to knowing how the system worked, who to talk to—or as one respondent put it “who not to talk to”—and “knowing the right people” as important pieces of knowledge that they carried “in their heads”. The terms “intuition”, “gut”, “judgement”, “cop on” and “know-how” were also used to describe such background forms of tacit knowing.

### 3.6 Continuity—threat or opportunity

Those interviewed were asked for their opinions on the large number of exits over the next five years—five (half) of the ten regarded these exits as an opportunity; the other five mainly as a threat. In terms of threat the key point is that all of these people are leaving around the same time. The majority were recruited when Semstate first came into existence over thirty years ago and are now coming up to retirement. This can be referred to as a variant of “The Acute Threat - Catastrophic Knowledge Loss” (Beazley *et al.* (2002: xi) used to describe the losses from the impending baby-boomer retirements in the United States. Two noted examples of where both a manager and an assistant manager in their areas had retired at the same time or within a short period of each other—a lot of “knowledge, expertise and management skills went out (...) overnight”. No internal candidates had emerged to fill these posts. Again it was commented on that there were some good people coming up through the system but that they do not have the required experience at this point—also noted above. Four perceived this threat to be due mainly to the loss of middle management grades—again due to the perceived difficulty in integrating external recruits from a credibility point of view. According to these and other respondents, big learning curves were going to be involved whether the candidates were internal or external:

*The big problem is the way the numbers are falling for us,*

*there are so many ... going out at the same time. If it was more of a trickle we'd be able to deal with it better. But the fact is we are going to lose so many of them.*

*The assistant manager is retiring this year and the manager is retiring in two and a half years time. So in two and a half years time all the knowledge will be gone. We are about ten years behind in my view.*

On the other hand there were those who believed that the loss would not be overwhelming, and that it could in fact be turned to advantage and open up new possibilities. People leaving could be "good or bad especially where people are worn out"; and other more optimistic comments such as:

*In fact I think it would be a good thing...get a package together and ...(get) people into the sunset very quickly, the quicker the better for Semstate.*

*The fact that [so many] people are leaving might be an opportunity to restructure Semstate totally..... we should set out a new platform for the future.*

In carrying out these interviews and observing the behaviours and body language of the interviewees, there was no doubt but that there was a deep concern expressed by all, even though their concerns related to different sides of the argument. Strong, even vehement, views are held on both sides. On one side were those who saw a serious threat to Semstate because of a lack of continuity. They feared loss of service to customers and clients, loss of credibility with stakeholders, breakdowns in systems, breakdowns in communication, differing interpretations of agreements....the list was long. This is again in keeping with the views expressed by Beazley *et al.* (2002) who argue that as the importance of knowledge increases the negative impact of knowledge loss for an organisation rises exponentially. The negative effects will differ depending on the organisation but these effects are costly and can send an organisation into a tailspin from which it might not recover. These were the types of

underlying concerns of the senior managers who viewed the impending loss of knowledge as a threat.

On the other hand there were those who felt that Semstate would survive despite this and would perhaps be better off *without* some of the knowledge that Semstate was preserving. Perhaps the time had come to jettison some of it? Its very strong culture reflexively preserves itself and its form or definition of organisational knowledge in a very robust manner, even though, in part at least, it may be past its sell-by-date. This is the implicit argument posed by at least half of the interviewees here. The perception is that Semstate looks back into its historical knowledge store, the safe 'inertial' view, rather than moving forward, the 'adaptive dynamic' in Canella and Lubatkin's (1993) terminology. CM is not solely about preserving old knowledge at the expense of the creation of new knowledge. Preserving existing operational knowledge is a crucial CM element but is not the sole goal. The primary purpose of CM is to create new knowledge based on the existing knowledge (Beazley *et al.*, 2000: 210) and Semstate may not be fully realizing the value of the knowledge and IC that it actually has.

It is not surprising perhaps that the group interviewed was evenly divided in their perceptions—there are clear advantages and disadvantages on both sides, but achieving a pragmatic balance between them is not going to be a simple task. The difficulty in transcending any adaptive-inertial dialectic, of course, lies in identifying who to retain and what to keep, what to jettison and what new or innovative ideas, processes or systems to introduce. There is no simple generic answer here.

### **3.7 Introducing a CM system— Barriers**

With one exception, all believed that a continuity management system should be in place. Without exception, however, all believed that there would be significant cultural barriers to implementing such a system. The main CM issues and suggestions to emerge here included the following: succession planning, rotation both within Semstate and outside, work shadowing, working in teams, mentoring,

coaching, good induction, appropriate management development and appointing people to positions as a development opportunity. While there were emphatic “YES” answers to the concept of bringing in some form of CM system, there was a corresponding emphasis on probable barriers to such a system. Encouragement qualified by pragmatic caution is the main finding here.

*Absolutely, there should be a system in place.... There is no doubt about that...(but) we haven't consciously gone out and ear-marked anyone for mentoring because you know that wouldn't sit well in [Semstate]...the culture is not right. The culture would have to change significantly.*

Many mentioned that a lot of knowledge exchange was going on informally:

*The only reason I knew that was because I met guys and had a cup of coffee with them and it came up in a conversation. There is a lot of stuff going on in little groups and nobody seems to be pulling it together. We know it through the old boy or the old girl network or we know it over a pint or something like that.*

One explained that there was a considerable amount of work shadowing going on, also noted above—but again, that it was never called that:

*It is better for both the individual and [Semstate] to have specialists specialising... provided the operation is such that there are other people in sufficiently close proximity to be schooled along the line so that all the expertise is not vested in [one] person and leaves with [that] person.*

Many expressed concern about union resistance to any form of succession planning—that such a system would be “fraught with danger”—that there would be an element of “teachers pet” and “people being lined up for jobs”. Such a system could be perceived to be favoring some over others. Three cited cost as being a barrier or, more likely, as an “excuse” not to get involved. Letting go of control was

also seen to be a problem, with one manager noting that Semstate “people don't easily give up control”. There was also one view that introducing yet another system (that is, a CM system) could be viewed as a burden—“managers are very busy; they still have to do the day job”. There was also a view that rotation would be “resisted by the unions and by some management grades”.

*Something like succession planning would be a problem as it could appear to fast-track some at the expense of others. Who decides on the chosen ones?*

Others mentioned the importance some people placed on “contacts” and how they guarded them:

*We are very protective of our position and feel that if we pass on too much knowledge we become redundant.*

*People are always looking at your job wondering when you will move on...(wondering) when you will fall off the edge!*

Another issue to emerge relates to the competitive performance bonus in place for Semstate's most senior managers. CM needs to take account of reward systems and how these impact on knowledge sharing. The current structure, it could be argued, is pitting the most senior people against each other and if that happens it is bound to cascade downwards with certain individuals being rewarded at the expense of the team. One respondent posed the apt question:

*If you had a performance bonus ... on your salary ... are you going to share your level of knowledge with me? It might be a different situation if I were retiring.*

It is notable that every single senior manager interviewed made some comment regarding information and/or knowledge sharing in the context of continuity management. This was either a spontaneous comment or as a result of a supplementary question during the interviews. For some, a CM system would not succeed because people quite simply would not share information/knowledge. Seven of the ten in the group believed that there were various difficulties and

problems around the issue of knowledge sharing—one of the most vexed and complex research areas in the KM field.

*I have worked with people who wouldn't tell you the time of day. They feel this is the way they control people. This is disastrous from a succession planning point of view.*

Because knowledge has traditionally been considered power and because knowledge creation is difficult work, many people are very reluctant to share it without reward or recognition. The majority of those interviewed in this study believe that the present Semstate culture is not yet “right” for this type of sharing. Knowledge hoarding, however, represents a huge threat to CM. If the hoarder leaves there is no back up; and if the hoarder stays there is no added value as others waste time trying to locate such knowledge by other means—with deleterious effects on both organisational efficiency and effectiveness. It is probable that a serious investigation of the present culture, visualisation of the type of future culture demanded by changing times, and how to go from one to the other is a prerequisite for introducing a successful CM system in Semstate—and perhaps also in others.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the idea of introducing a CM system in Semstate, an organisation set to lose one third of its senior managers and a significant percentage of its workforce over the next five years. The main findings are that the senior managers interviewed were evenly divided on the question of opportunity versus threat; there is informal learning occurring in pockets where knowledge is certainly being transferred despite the fact that no formal CM system yet exists; there is a clear consensus in favour of introducing a CM system but this is pragmatically qualified by a clear recognition of the barriers, many of which support the research summarised by Beazley *et al.* (2002) outlined briefly above.

Introducing CM raises a number of serious issues, many of which have far reaching implications, not just for Semstate, but also for other organisations contemplating embarking on this road. Significant cultural

change is probably necessary if the requisite knowledge sharing and transfer is to occur. The Intellectual Capital issues raised in a CM context can also be expected to have serious implications for remuneration and reward structures. Succession planning, for example, emerged as a major concern for many people in this study—yet, there are no criteria at present by which successors can be selected. Competencies that take account of the entire scope of what is meant by IC (human, internal, external) need to be developed so that the requirements for management positions can be more open and transparent. CM is a new management function that requires integration with other management functions (such as KM and HRM/HRD) in order to be successful. Succession planning, coaching, mentoring and rotation all have some role to play.

*The more critical a job is to the company, the more important it is that it be part of a knowledge continuity management system. You also need to consider such questions as how significantly poor productivity in the job would hurt co-workers or the company and the complexity of the knowledge needed to perform the job successfully. The more sophisticated and complex the knowledge a worker possesses, the more difficult it is to pass on—and the more crucial it is that it be passed on. (Field, 2003)*

From a theoretical viewpoint, the difficulty in transcending any adaptive-inertial dialectic (Canella and Lubatkin, 1993) proves useful in that the general finding here is that getting the organisational culture right is a key first step in attempting to introduce a CM system. Without buy-in it will not succeed—and it is probable that this will require fairly radical cultural change, which is never easy. CM is not a quick fix, involves painstaking work, and takes time to complete and initially will probably represent a cost—longer term, however, the benefits are potentially substantial. Comments to the authors welcome.

## 5. Acknowledgements

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## 6. Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Do you think that senior staff in Semstate are easily replaced from inside if they leave?
- Do you think senior staff would be easily replaced from outside?
- Do you think this loss of senior people has any impact on our clients/customers in terms of service gaps?
- How? Can you elaborate briefly?
- What are the three (3) main sources of information that help you to do your job successfully?
- If you examine your own job, in percentage terms, how much of the knowledge that you need to do it is in your own head?
- What are the three most important things that you would highlight to your successor in knowledge terms, to help her/him to succeed in your present job?
- From your perspective, at what level in the organisation is the greatest threat, if there is one, in terms of discontinuity of knowledge in the organisation when people leave?
- What, if any, barriers would you envisage to the introduction of a continuity management system within Semstate?
- If you had a choice, what method would you suggest to pass knowledge on to your successor or new entrant into Semstate?
- Are you presently doing anything to harvest or codify your own knowledge and /or pass it on at any level to your successor?
- Do you believe Semstate should have a system in place to pass on such knowledge?
- Would such a system succeed?
- Yes? No? Can you elaborate a little