



Conducting Oral Histories for Succession Planning

Cultural Stewardship Planning Initiative

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Overview

Conducting oral history interviews of employees at your organization can be a crucial and helpful part of the succession planning process. This interview can be flexible and highlight the most important knowledge that you would like to see transfer to new team members, promoted employees, and existing colleagues. However, this process can contain new information and skills for some, and it is important to be diligent in every step of the process to ensure that your interviews are preserved so that they can exist through many transitions. This guide will provide you with helpful information and guidance for many steps of the process.

Conducting an Oral History

Before you hit record, it is important to come prepared. You need to think about who from your organization you would like to interview, what questions you would like to ask, and details about where the interview will take place. Remember to keep in mind the different possibilities of future audiences – while you might be doing these interviews with a specific audience in mind, such as new hires, these interviews could help a wider variety of individuals than you might think, such as in the case of a staff member on medical leave.

Choosing Individuals from Your Organization

- Consider tenure – choose individuals that can speak to many years of institutional knowledge, if possible.
- What individuals, if they left your organization tomorrow, would be taking knowledge and skills with them that would not be preserved? Consider starting your interviews with these individuals.
- Think about what knowledge you are specifically trying to preserve and transfer with this project: who can speak to that knowledge? Is there a specific purpose for this process, such as impending retirements or an overhaul of training processes? Keep this in mind when choosing individuals and selecting questions.
- What is the best way to capture the knowledge that you are looking to convey? Is audio the best format? If you are looking to portray specific processes, consider if video might be a better format.
- While you want to capture as much useful information as possible, an extremely long recording is not the most productive for future use of the recording. A spreadsheet organizing the types of information you are targeting and is of the most importance might be the most productive way to prepare for the interview.

Generating Questions

- Going into your knowledge transfer interview, make sure you come prepared with a list of questions. It might also be helpful to distribute the questions a few days ahead of the interview so that your interviewee can take notes.

- Consult other members of your organization and even the interviewee themselves about what questions should be asked. Getting the perspective of several people can be helpful to cover aspects of the knowledge transfer that might not immediately spring to mind.
- Before beginning the interview questions, ask the interviewee basic information, such as their name, position, tenure, and any other relevant information. Keep in mind that future members of your organization using the interview might not have any context for who the interviewee was in your organization.
- If you are seeking to make knowledge transfer interviews a regular process, consider generating a questionnaire that can easily be adapted, if needed.
- What are the biggest challenges you have faced when individuals have left your organization? How can they be remedied through this process? Add questions that will address these issues.
- If the individual you are interviewing is leaving their position, these questions can be helpful:
 - What skills were critical for success in this position?
 - What tools (ie. software, professional development courses, equipment, other colleagues, etc.) did you find helpful during your tenure? What tools would you like to see made available for this role in the future?
 - Outline the day-to-day responsibilities of this role – what are the most important job functions?
 - When you trained for this role, what did you find helpful? What would you like to see added to the training process?
 - Are there any updates that have been made to your role during your tenure? How could the training process be updated to reflect these updates?
 - What have been the biggest challenges in this role? What are your suggestions on how to lessen these challenges?
- When interviewing current members of your organization, asking them what challenges the organization would face upon them leaving can be helpful. Ask them questions such as:
 - What organizational software do you have access to? Are you the only person in the organization with the password?
 - Who are the key contacts you engage with outside of our organization and what is their importance to your role? Where can their information be found?
 - Which of your colleagues has the best understanding of what you do and your day-to-day processes? Could they easily fill in for you in case of emergency? If there is no identifiable colleague, what are the skills that serve as a barrier?

Practical Things to Think About

- Consider the location where your interview will be taking place. Is it noisy? Busy? These might not be good factors for producing a good recording that will be able to be used productively in the future.
- Make sure to familiarize yourself with all the equipment you will be using during the interview prior to conducting the interview. Take a couple of test recordings and upload them to where you will store the interview recordings to ensure the file format is compatible and to check that the recording is intelligible.

Post-Interview Considerations

- Storage of your recording after the interview is one of the most crucial parts of this process. Immediately back-up your file in several places once the interview is complete. A later part of this guide will delve into further storage considerations and metadata.
- Envision your first interview ultimately as a test of this process. Show the recording to individuals in your institution who may have no context for the processes laid out in the recording and see if they are able to easily disseminate the information.
- Transcribing the interview can be incredibly helpful in considering the long-term use of the recording. Doing a transcription soon after the interview can help with issues such as sound quality or a speaker who might be difficult to understand, while also increasing the overall accessibility to the knowledge at hand.

Equipment Guidance

One of the most important aspects of capturing oral histories for knowledge transfer is using the right equipment, to ensure that this knowledge can be preserved through many transitions.

- **Audio Recorder**

Select an audio recorder that will allow you to record your interview in the proper format, .wav and .mp3 being recommended formats. Ensure that it can accommodate an external SD or micro-SD card so that you have the proper amount of storage. When purchasing, check whether it has the proper input for the microphone(s) you are interested in.

- **Zoom** recorders are most frequently used, particularly the Zoom H4n, H1n, and H6
- **Tascam** recorders are also recommended, particularly the Tascam DR-40X and DR-100mkiii

- **Batteries, including extra [2 sets], charged batteries, and/or power cord**

- A power adaptor provides the most reliability in an interview situation, but when unavailable batteries can also be used. It is recommended that several batteries are brought to an interview set-up in case of battery failure.

- **Memory Card**

- An SD card is highly recommended, as audio recorders themselves typically have limited internal storage capacity.
- Make sure you have a back-up SD card in addition, if not multiple.
- Lastly, ensure that the SD card is compatible with your audio recorder before purchase.

- **Camera**

- The addition of a camera can be helpful when documenting specific processes or capturing visual components of workflows.
- It is possible to use something as simple as an **iPhone** or other smartphone, but if conducting a sit-down interview, it is still recommended to use a separate recording device as back-up.

- **Headphones**

- Headphones should be used to test the levels before beginning an interview and to monitor them during the interview.

- **Microphone(s)**

- Many audio recorders come with built-in microphones, but an external microphone can provide a better quality of recording. Depending on where the interview is taking place, such as outside, a specific type of microphone may be necessary.
- Keep in mind that if you have multiple speakers in an interview set-up, you will need a microphone for each speaker.
- Consider a table mount for your microphone, checking the compatibility before purchase. The mount will give your microphone stability.
- For indoor interviews, a lavalier microphone that clips on to articles of clothing is the most recommended. For outdoor interviews, a uni-directional microphone would be best, in order to pick up less unwanted noise. Many microphones can be powered by the digital recorder itself, once plugged in.

- When using an external microphone, make sure you enable your digital recorder to use that microphone, rather than the built-in microphone

Storing Your Files

Storing your files properly and clearly in an accessible place will guarantee knowledge transfer can take place. Use these guidelines to make sure your files remain preserved for future members of your organization:

- **Name your files clearly**, in a way that will be understandable to members of your organization who might not have been present or aware of the interview process. Consider incorporating details such as date (particularly year), job title rather than name of the participant, and any other details that might be helpful for someone looking for knowledge about a specific role or department.
- **Store your files in an accessible place** where the relevant members of your organization who might need the files can access them. However, consider any sensitive information that might be contained in the recordings and be careful of storing them in a public drive. Check with your organization's IT department to check the privacy of where you are storing the files and security of storing the files on there in terms of recovering the file if it is accidentally deleted.
 - If your organization does not have a centralized file storage location, consider using Google Drive or YouTube; however, check the privacy settings on your files – make sure they are only accessible by people who have the link or account information. Also, make sure these files will still be accessible by the necessary parties if you leave your organization.
- **Document information about the files** and keep this information connected to the files. Keep in mind that these recordings will likely be used by members of your organization down the line who have limited context about the recording process. While the name of the recording can be incredibly helpful, having additional information connected to the recording can ensure the long-term nature of these recordings. If you kept documentation from the recording process tracking the different interviews, it might be wise to use this same documentation to provide information about the recordings. The Oral History Association has a [guide](#) to managing oral history collections that can help you manage your knowledge transfer interviews.
- **If your organization has its own guidance about storage and naming procedures, stick to the procedures they have outlined.** This will ensure that your files are maintained within your organization's system and are, hopefully, easily findable by a colleague seeking them out.

Conclusions

Capturing knowledge at your organization and preserving it for future colleagues can set up your team, department, and organization for success. However, it is imperative that this knowledge, particularly when captured through recordings, is recorded in the correct way, and stored in a way to ensure its preservation. Following the guidelines outlined in this guide is a huge part of guaranteeing you complete this process in the right way. Just as important as these practical guidelines is continual consideration of your future audience, whether that audience is current colleagues or a new hire in ten years. Consider these questions – what knowledge is it important that they receive? How can it be delivered in a way that is easily digestible and with context for the overall functions of your organization?

Oral histories are simply one aspect of the succession planning process and should be revisited continually as your organization grows, shifts, and changes over time. Consider incorporating them into the training of new hires and promoted colleagues not only so they can inherit the knowledge of other colleagues but become familiarized with oral histories as a training tool within your institution.

Further Reading

“Designing a Project.” *National Parks Service*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/oral-history-resources-designing-a-project.htm>.

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“Oral History Technology.” *Texas Oral History Association, Baylor University*, <https://toha.web.baylor.edu/resources-and-newsletter-archive/oral-history-technology>.

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“Vermont Folklife Fieldwork and Research Guides.” *Vermont Folklife*, <https://www.vtfolklife.org/fieldwork-guides>.