

Passing On IT Tribal Knowledge

From the beginning of time, humans have passed on knowledge of how to survive, from person to person. This knowledge includes where to go for certain foods, how to hunt certain animals, where to find water, and more. Even today, Aboriginal tribes around the world still pass on this information by mouth. This tribal knowledge is not usually written down, but relies heavily on the memory of the person passing it on.

Unfortunately, Tribal Knowledge still exists today in many IT departments. Commonly used scripts, data base performance monitoring tricks, even common functions for code writing, are often part of this Tribal Knowledge. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge is still passed on by word of mouth.

I was "the new guy" recently at my new job. I had to dig around and ask questions to learn many of the tricks that are used in my position. We just hired a new contractor. To help him come up to speed and get oriented, my manager asked me to mentor this new team member. The new guy now has to mentor the newer new guy.

Since I was the newest member of the team, and most recently had to learn how the job was done, I am in a unique position to provide just what is needed to help the new team member come up to speed quickly.

Here are a few of the tools and processes I've put together to help pass on the Tribal Knowledge.

- Cheat Sheet - This is a document that contains the most commonly used commands. It includes small scripts to look through files for certain values, tell how much space is being used on the file system, and contact information for certain key individuals. This was created by a prior employee, and I have added to it as I learn and use new shortcuts.

- Environment Diagrams - There are several servers and databases in use in a complex data warehouse system. It is near impossible to remember all the server names and connection information. It is important to create a document that provides all this important information, as well as a picture of what the network looks like.

- Process Documentation - There are certain processes that are performed frequently. These can range from how to clear old files off the file server, to how to conduct emergency change requests. It is important to create documents that cover all these repeated processes, so new team members can perform the processes when required.

- Contact Sheet - It is a good idea to include the contact information of other team members, managers, and even cross department contacts. It is also important to have the contact information for sources and consumers of the data in your system. The contact information for the DBAs and System Administrators is also important to provide to new team members.

These documents if maintained properly, can be very helpful to a new team member. The best way to ensure that a standard version of these documents are disseminated to team members is to upload them to a central document repository. The documents can then be updated and maintained as needed to ensure the information doesn't become stale.

It is important that Tribal Knowledge in an IT organization be captured, stored and maintained, so that new team members can have quick access to the information necessary to perform their jobs. This will allow new team members to become productive and contribute to the success of the organization much quicker than if they have to search for the information themselves.

