Cityvision

GREEN MAKERS

Taking action for a sustainable future

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ALL SYSTEMS CAN GO

CITIES RISK LOSING CRITICAL INFORMATION WHEN STAFF RETIRE.

TAKE A MINUTE to think about the staff at your city with the most experience and expertise. Do you rely on them to provide context for projects and historic knowledge about key assets? Are they your go-to resource for records and data? Do they understand how your internal systems and workflows work—and are they some of the few that do?

If the answer to any of the questions above is yes, you might want to take a look at the organizational sustainability at your city. One of the most common issues I hear about (whether we're working with city managers, public works directors, or city planners) is how institutional knowledge is stored and shared between staff. Without seamless systems in place to collect, store, and share information, organizations risk reliance on a few key people. A deep and crucial knowledge base is often lost when staff retire—or worse, it becomes inaccessible when unexpected medical emergencies or natural disasters occur.

Here's an example we often see: a public works department manages water, sewer, and stormwater for a medium-size city. They keep track of their assets using paper maps and notes, and if digital data is available, it is siloed and available to only a few people. Most staff rely heavily on a couple of tenured staff members—often with decades of experience working for the city—for historic knowledge of asset locations, condition, and connectivity.

What happens when the staff members in the example retire? It will be hard for other staff to understand the systems and changes that have occurred over time, find resources, and efficiently manage the system in the immediate future, which can potentially impact service delivery to citizens. If your organization faces similar issues, consider taking these first steps:

- Clearly identify what information should and can be captured and maintained (e.g., asset locations and their associated attributes).
- Identify all your current data sources and their accuracy.
- Establish a process for resolving conflicting data.
- Identify your most experienced staff, and implement a plan that transitions their institutional knowledge from inside their brain to a shared space.
- Create a single source of asset information, and set up workflows that allow you to update it from the field or office as needed.
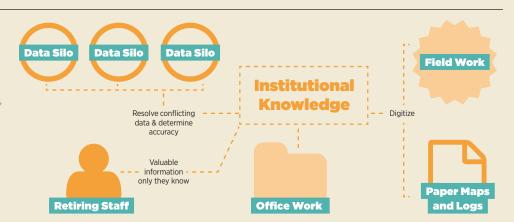
The bottom line: organizational sustainability is about the endurance of a system and the processes that run that system. Good maintenance, systematic inspections and reviews, and access to information and knowledge about the system for all staff will make your city stronger, more efficient, and more resilient. ©

Tyler Vick manages operations at FLO, a partner in the AWC GIS Consortium, and specializes in asset management implementation strategies for local government.

CORE STRENGTH

Keeping key data and perspectives broadly accessible can help an organization function smoothly.

Data Silo · Data Silo · Data Silo

Resolve conflicting data & determine accuracy

Institutional Knowledge

Field Work

Digitize

Valuable information only they know

Retiring Staff

Office Work

Paper Maps and Logs