

# Experience Capitalization

## What is Experience Capitalization?

Experience Capitalization is a method to learn from own and others' experience. It is the formalization of a natural human behaviour: looking back before embarking on something new.

Before we start doing something, we automatically (or hopefully)

- look back at what we did last time in a similar situation (and maybe ask somebody else, too);
- reflect on what worked and what did not work;
- and draw conclusions for our next steps.

Experience Capitalization is a formal procedure of learning now (from the past) for the future. It can be done by colleagues over coffee, or can take months and engage crowds of experts: scale and complexity vary according to task, but the basic steps are always the same.

- Experience Capitalization starts with a learners' question. The learners – this can be individuals, groups or organizations – often assemble a group of knowledgeable practitioners.
- The mixed learner/experience holder group reflects jointly on similar challenges in similar situations.
- The conclusions reached in the form of “lessons to be learnt” focus on the learner's context and on change he/she wants to achieve. In most cases, the results of Experience Capitalizations are documented in the form of “lessons learnt” or “good practices”.

### Typical learners' questions at the beginning of an experience capitalization:

- We are embarking on something (new) we have never done before or have first experiences only. We are in need of good practices.
- We have applied all knowledge available but the results are not satisfactory. We are in need of alternatives.
- Many of us are doing the same thing. We would like to know what works best; we would like to improve our way of doing things based on the experiences of others.
- We are participating in policy dialogue or have to formulate a policy statement. We need to broaden our understanding, we need to summarise lessons and experiences.
- Our staffs want to improve their understanding in key areas of their work. They want to learn from the experience existing in our own and in partners' organizations.

Experience Capitalization processes – as mentioned above – last from a coffee talk up to some months. Most often, Experience Capitalization in daily routine work however takes place in form of a workshop, be it as a single standing event or as a part of a longer lasting process. For this kind of event, the following workshop format is suggested. It can be adapted to different contexts and needs.

Experience Capitalization can also be done in virtual settings. Like this a much wider range of different experience holders and learners from different parts of the world can be involved. The basic steps of the Experience Capitalization are the same. However, a virtual setting poses some additional challenges. Thus, some specifics to be considered in virtual capitalization are presented below, in addition to the workshop format.

## Workshop format for Experience Capitalization

### 1. Clarify the scope of change and of adapting practices

Experience Capitalization is a first step in a process of change. It paves the way for changing practices, or procedures, projects and programs, concepts, strategies and policies. Hence, at the beginning of an Experience Capitalization, we need to clarify the actual scope of change and adaptation:

#### **Who wants to change what and is able to do so?**

The clarification within what scope options for new practices will be developed is decisive and shapes the next steps of the process. The willingness, ability and potential for change are prerequisites for an Experience Capitalization, as well as the involvement of change owners and decision-makers. Elaborating options that are too far off the scope influenced by the involved change owners, can easily lead to frustration of all involved actors.

### 2. Formulate guiding questions to be answered during the capitalization

The formulation of guiding questions starts with the identification of the starting point for the Experience Capitalization and the definition of what a good result will look like:

#### **Where do we stand and where do we want to get to?**

These are the two key indications for the formulation of guiding questions. Guiding questions can be understood as questions guiding one from where we are now to where we want to get to. It is crucial that the questions are related to the identified scope of change. Experience Capitalization is more successful when the objective and questions are formulated as precisely and clearly as possible. This in turn will also make achieved results more useful and applicable.

**Tip:** Focus on few, particular aspects and limit yourself to 2 – 3 well formulated guiding questions.

### 3. Clarify the roles

There are generally four different types of participants involved in Experience Capitalization:

#### **Experience holders**

Experience holders are at the centre of a capitalization process. They bring in their knowledge and experience, formulate insights and lessons to be learnt that are common to all of them, and suggest improvements and changes. To get a broad base for the capitalization it is vital to include experience holders with complementary experiences and diverse contextual and professional backgrounds.

**Tip:** In order to facilitate the change process initiated by the capitalization, choose people whom the learners/change owners trust.

#### **Change owners/learners**

Change owners are the ones who want to learn from experiences and thus improve their practices. Also experience holders can be change owners if they have scope for adapting their own practices. It is advisable to have the change owners and hierarchy/decision makers involved at least when the guiding questions and expected results of the capitalization are defined and later again when conclusions are reached. In this way ownership for change is fostered.

One common reason why change initiatives often fail is that the problem is not understood by decision makers when the solution is offered to them. In other words: it is not possible to sell the problem and the solution at the same time.

**Tips:** Strive for an early involvement of decision makers.  
In bigger and longer lasting Experience Capitalizations, define a core learning group – composed of experience holders and change owners – for the full process. In key moments only, enlarge the group and invite more people for a well-designed workshop.

### Subject matter specialists

Specialists may be enlisted as process supporters to the Experience Capitalization. They can advise, sum up and validate results.

**Tip:** Choose sector specialists that are valued by the learners and experience holders alike. Check key moments, when to include them in the process.

### Facilitator

Whenever the workshop group exceeds five persons, associate a facilitator in the design and lead of the process.

**Tip:** Select a person who knows the subject matter sufficiently without being an expert.

## 4. Design the workshop process

There is a multiplicity of possibilities of how to design an Experience Capitalization workshop. It is the art of facilitation to find appropriate methods that suit the context, the questions and the participants. In general such a workshop can be divided into three main parts:

1. **Input:** Experience holders present their case; participants learn main experiences of all cases (re-)presented.

**Possible methods:** Presentations according to guiding questions, info market, storytelling, etc.

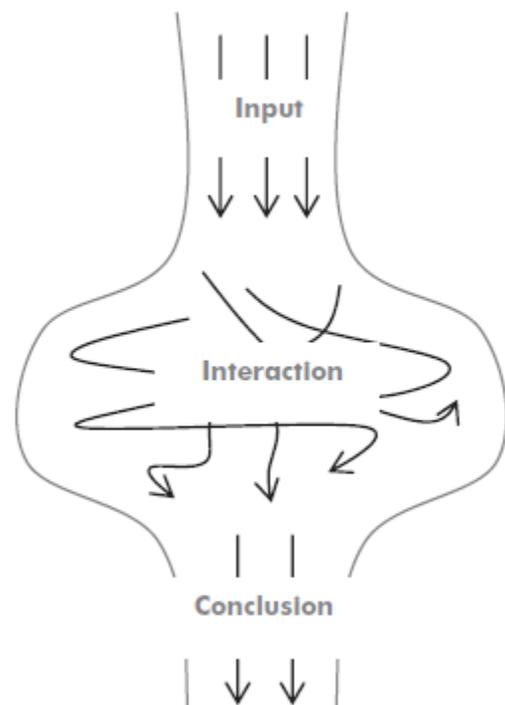
2. **Discussion/Interaction/Exchange:** All participants formulate answers to the guiding questions on the basis of what they have learnt from the experiences presented.

**Possible methods:** group work, plenary discussion, flipchart chat, etc.

3. **Conclusion:** Participants formulate an agenda for change: For change owners to take over and embark to new practices, what follow-up work and documentation is needed? Who else could be interested in the findings of the workshop? Is there a need for additional documentation and dissemination?

**Possible methods:** prioritization of ideas, scenario technique, role plays, etc.

Following the capitalization workshop, the actual change process starts. The change owners/learners are now in the centre, “replacing” the experience holders. A feedback to the experience holders about the results of the change process can be highly instructive and will be appreciated by the experience holders.



## Experience Capitalization in virtual groups

Instead of gathering different experience holders and learners in one place for a face-to-face workshop, Experience Capitalization can also be designed as a virtual process using online collaboration tools. In this way a wide range of experience holders can be reached at the same time in different parts of the world.

The steps of virtual Experience Capitalization are basically the same as in the presented face-to-face workshop format. A learner's question triggers a reflection and discussion of experiences in a mixed group of experience holders and learners. Roles have to be defined and agreed to, working steps to be planned and communicated even more accurate than in a face-to-face event. From this the experience holders extract the insights and conclusions they have in common and formulate together with the change owners lessons to be learnt and change agendas.

### Solution Exchange

[www.solutionexchange-un.net.in](http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in)

A good example for successful virtual experience capitalizations are the "consolidated reply" processes developed by Solution Exchange. They are characterized by the following elements:

1. A query is posted on the e-forum of a network and experience holders are invited to post replies within a predetermined time frame. Frequently, the moderator supports members with the wording of the query, making sure the query is **short, easy to understand and appealing to be answered**.
2. Moderators **lobby experienced network members** to post replies in the e-forum (back channel communication). This lobbying is worked mostly over the phone. According to Solution Exchange, it is the major time investment of the e-moderator.
3. Frequently replies to queries include **links and references** (to documents, discussions in other fora, examples or persons). This allows keeping the virtual discussion lean. In this way richer material can be included in the discussion than would be possible in a face-to-face event.
4. After three weeks, when the discussion campaign is over, the e-moderator sums up the discussion in a "**consolidated reply**". The e-moderator condenses the main messages into an easy-to-understand analytical summary and includes all individual contributions in full into the document, as well as a list of reference projects and experience holders. Typically, these consolidated replies are written by senior technical experts.

## Specifics to be considered in virtual Experience Capitalization

The coffee break or evening beer is yet to be invented in virtual settings. Online exchange and collaboration are just as much a social process as discussions in and around a face-to-face workshop, and thus the challenge is to build up relationships and trust also in a virtual setting.

The development of personal relations can be supported in virtual exchange by special measures:

- People can be encouraged to introduce themselves at the beginning of a post, and possibly to include a picture at the bottom of the message.
- The explicit encouragement of back channel communication, especially on skype (video conferencing), helps establish relationships.
- Since altruism is part of the motivation for most respondents, asking back for further help and advice deepens relationships.
- And finally, inviting colleagues who have virtually proven to be exceptionally knowledgeable to participate face-to-face as experience holders in “moments forts” bridges the difference between virtual and face-to-face processes.

In a virtual setting where social control is limited, strategic communication is frequent. Also trust can be lacking for exposing practices that did not fully work out or even failed. This can lead to shared experiences and replies to queries that feel a bit too polished, a bit too abstract, a bit too-good-to-be-true. What often happens is that experience holders expose one part of their experience publicly, and another part only privately to the learner via email or phone.

One way to formalize this is to schedule an e-meeting among a limited group of participants after the publication of the consolidated reply:

- In a smaller group of selected experience holders a more trustful environment can be created for a discussing and complementing the results of the e-discussion.
- The preceding e-discussion is the obvious frame of reference, with which all participants have to be familiar. Discussions then focus on issues which were masked by political correctness in virtual communication, and on further adapting lessons learnt to context.
- Audio-conferences (e. g. skype) or better video-conferencing work for this. Often it is useful to have such an exchange externally moderated.

**Planning** is for an Experience Capitalization in a virtual group at least as important as for a face-to-face event:

- Design the interaction schedule: start and end dates, process phases (brainstorming, evidence production, verification, consolidation, summing up, etc.). Be aware that the participants need to ensure time besides their daily tasks for such an e-discussion. It is advisable to limit the discussion to a certain timeframe e. g. 2 or 3 weeks and to announce the dates early enough.
- Decide what can be done virtually in the open and what should be done backchannel (transparency vs. confidentiality), what has to be treated in subgroups (e. g. consolidation of contradictory positions), what needs synchronous interaction (e. g. a video conference) and what can be done asynchronously (e. g. e-mail or forum), and for what (possibly) face-to-face encounters are needed.
- Specify the rules of engagement: code of conduct, evidence validation procedure and distribution of roles.

For choosing the **technology for virtual exchange**, consider first and most of all what technology suits the participants, and not what suits your process design. Guiding criteria can be:

- Ask your main stakeholders (the change owner/core learning group and the experience holders) what e-collaboration technology they are using and liking. Try to do the capitalization with this. This way you can limit the introduction of new tools as much as possible. Most basic tools such as email-lists (e. g. dgroup) usually serve the purpose.

- For joint editing of documents, consider whether this can be done by sending word files attached to emails to participants, collecting file copies with track changes, and copy/past editing. Otherwise Gogledocs may be helpful and suitable. Wikis are usually not that easy for everyone to use.
- It is difficult to start an e-collaboration process via email only, it is difficult to sustain it by email only, and it is nearly impossible to resolve differences or conflicts via email. All those things are much easier with voice, or better still with video. Phone is the low-tech option, skype is intermediary, web-meeting tools would be the high-end.

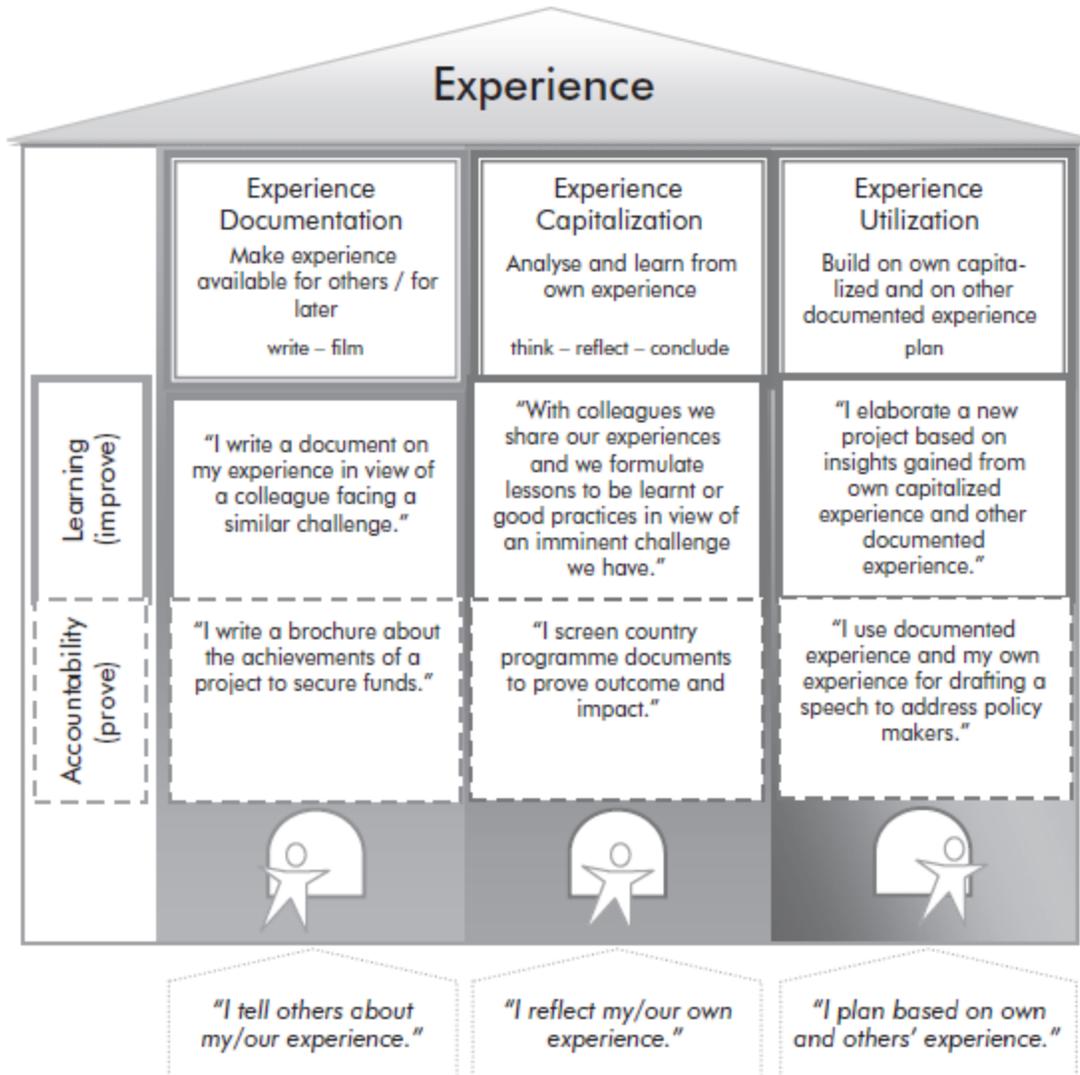
The critical issue to keep in mind is: How much time will people spend on learning new IT tools, and how much on building relationships?

A comprehensive list of different tools for virtual exchange and collaboration can be found in the KS toolkit on <http://www.kstoolkit.org/KSTools>

## Annex

### Differentiate Experience Documentation – Capitalization – Utilization

The table below explains the difference between Experience Capitalization and Experience Documentation. With the third aspect, Experience Utilization, emphasis is given to taking up the experiences (documented and capitalized) in planning and change processes. The interaction between the three – Experience Documentation, Capitalization and Utilization – is illustrated subsequently with a hiking story (see next page).



**Experience documentation** is directed at "learning in the future" and making information available to third parties. The objective is to create a retrievable memory. In addition, documentation serves accountability and archiving functions.

**Experience capitalization** aims at changing one's own practices or institutional structures, "learning now for the future". It refers to the transformation of (individual and institutional) knowledge into capital by those directly involved in order to change a collective, institutional practice. Experience capitalization is a learning process and paves the way for change – or is a partial step in a process of change already in progress.

**Experience utilization** means designing and performing planning processes taking in consideration lessons learnt and good practice based on own and others' experiences.

Experience making, capitalization, documentation and utilization – the example of a hiking tour

