

# Time to Take Off the Training Wheels



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**Teaching a kid to ride a bike is hard work.** Sure, you can put training wheels on the bike, and the kid will be mostly safe, build some confidence and manage to get around. But it's not really riding a bike, is it?

You don't truly learn to ride until the training wheels come off. As the teacher, that means you have to spend a lot of time running alongside, coaching and encouraging. It also means you have to know when to let go.

The same is true of training employees, especially if we expect them to be the next generation of leaders who run our companies.

I read an interesting article in *Bloomberg Businessweek* about mentorship programs and what a number of progressive companies are doing to ensure that the up-and-comers will be prepared to take over when the time comes ("Chowing Down on Boomers' Brains," from the January 25-31, 2016 edition).

Unfortunately, for most of America, that time has already come, and the gear industry is no exception. Most of the Baby Boom generation has already reached retirement age. Even Generation X is getting close, which means the Millennials (those born between 1980-2000) are becoming a more and more important part of the workforce.

In fact, the article says, until last year, Baby Boomers made up the largest portion of the U.S. population, and Generation X made up the largest portion of the workforce. But today, Millennials make up the biggest portion of both categories.

The question raised by the article is whether companies are doing enough to make sure they're ready.

We all know how serious this is, and the gear industry is no exception. Every day, more of the oldest, most experienced employees leave the workforce, taking with them lifetimes of knowledge and experience.

According to our most recent "State of the Gear Industry" survey (Nov/Dec 2015), 63% of you say your companies are currently experiencing a shortage of skilled labor.

According to the *Bloomberg Businessweek* article, 78% of executives surveyed thought the threat of losing business-critical expertise was more of an issue than it was just five years ago. A whopping 84% said they frequently (24%) or sometimes (60%) lose top managers or other experts without successors.

So what are we supposed to do?

It all comes down to figuring out a way to transfer the knowledge, the article says. Major companies like BAE Systems, General Motors, General Electric and others are coming up with ways to formalize and encourage that transfer via mentorship programs, training initiatives and special task forces.

At BAE, for example, a knowledge-transfer group of about a half-dozen people is assigned whenever the company learns that an employee with deep institutional knowledge is planning to retire. The teams meet regularly over months to talk and exchange advice. The article also mentioned one manager who demoted himself prior to retirement so he could let a younger manager step in. The two worked together on a number of key projects during the transition, and the younger manager was fully prepared when the time came.

All the companies mentioned in the article benefitted from these knowledge transfer programs. They saved money in training costs. They completed projects more successfully, and they maintained their competitive advantage.

It seems clear that we can't afford to just let knowledge walk out the door. The next generation needs the coaching, encouragement and insight that the older generation can provide. And they need to take on the responsibility that the older generation may be reluctant to give up. Sure, it can be a lot of work for the older generation, who might prefer to be left alone, and who might prefer to leave the youngsters to their own means.

But doing nothing is akin to leaving the training wheels on, and the kids will never learn to ride that way.

P.S. Don't overlook the vast knowledge included in the more than 2,000 technical articles we've published in the last 31 years, organized by subject, in the GT LIBRARY on our website at [www.geartechnology.com](http://www.geartechnology.com).