

Experience capitalization

Accumulating experience capital to prepare change processes

A conceptual definition of experience capitalization

Experience capitalization refers to the transformation of (individual and institutional) knowledge into capital by those directly involved in order to change a collective, institutional practice. It aims at changing one's own practices or structures.

Experience capitalization is one method of reviewing experiences in order to produce knowledge. It is a **learning process** which brings about **changes** by reverting to existing but latent experiences. Capitalizing on experiences paves the way for change – or is a partial step in a process of change already in progress. It supplies a basis for the planned and purposeful sequence of changes. Although experience capitalizations are performed by experience holders, they can be used by anyone desiring to change a practice.

Experience capitalizations can be directed at both the **strategic orientations** of organizations and activities and their conceptual basis, as well as at improving **operations** and processes. In both instances the initiative may stem from the geographical divisions or from the F Department.

All of us continually undergo a learning process in the scope of our activities so that capitalizing on experiences is an ongoing process. But only when individual knowledge is made relevant to the organization is it **capitalized institutionally**. Only if experience capitalizations are configured as planned and collective events, when a procedure is agreed upon by all participants and is directed towards achieving a predefined goal, do they exhibit a useful and communicable form or become processes with controllable results which can be implemented methodically in order to improve a practice.

Conceptual differentiations

Experience capitalization is not the same as **experience documentation**. In addition to archiving and accountability functions, experience documentation is directed at „*learning in the future*“, and making information available to third parties. The objective is to create a retrievable memory.

Experience capitalization is a form of organizational learning. It overlaps with a variety of other procedures, with the documentation and exchange of experiences, with evaluations, case studies, cross-section analyses and other methods used to evaluate, present and apply experience. One important difference is the fact that in the process of experience capitalization, available experience is collected from the “stakeholders”, from the persons and organizations directly involved, and then assimilated and used to plan and implement changes.

As concerns contents, the experience capitalization process does not require the involvement of third parties. The processes and results of experience capitalization belong to the participants themselves – although its results can be made available to other organizational units or third parties.

Experience capitalization cannot be delegated. External players will only be called in when those directly involved – the experience holders – ask them to participate. In such case, they are delegated a specific role, such as that of structuring processes.



Purpose of experience capitalization

Experience capitalization aims at changing a practice – within projects or programs (country programs, sectorial or thematic programs, etc.), or within concepts, strategies and policies. The accumulated and structured experience capital is then to be invested and implemented in order to achieve improved performance.

Typical questions in experience capitalization are e.g.:

- “What do we know which can help us improve our future performance?”
- “What experiences can we use to realize our project or program more purposefully and how can we accomplish this, or how can we do more justice to context when shaping our concept or strategy?”
- “Our project or master plan is improved with respect to these aspects (*cite aspects*).”
- “We need insights on the following aspects (*cite aspects*) to improve our project or strategy.”

Experience capitalization must be seen as a part of a bigger organizational learning process.

Experience capitalization is a learning process which paves the way for change. Capitalizing experience means consolidating already acquired experience into common viewpoints within organizational learning processes and translating them into a basis for a new orientation of activities, for the adaptation of concepts.

Lessons learned and good practices are the output of experience capitalization. Their outcome refers to triggered changes. The application of experiences must be prepared and agreed upon by all participants. The investment of “knowledge” capital must be planned with a maximum of consensus and implemented as a project of change. The purpose of experience capitalization is only achieved when a practice has actually been modified.

Consolidated experiences are not automatically implemented as a logical consequence of experience capitalization. This depends on the willingness of the persons and organizations involved to change, including those in hierarchical functions, as well as on existing structures and decisions which experience holders cannot make on their own. Last but not least – local partners and target groups must also support the changes. Unlike experience capitalization, the players involved in projects of change are usually not “autonomous”.

Methods for experience capitalization

Experiences can be capitalized in very different ways, using a variety of instruments and procedures. Common to all forms of experience capitalization is the objective of changing a practice. To this end, individual and organizational knowledge are integrated and relevant actions undertaken.

The form of experience capitalization and the **selection of appropriate instruments** depend on the motivation and the objective of experience capitalization, on personnel and institutional participation in the process, and on the geographical range. Finally, based on their form, experience capitalizations also become part of institutional traditions. Processes and reasons for experience capitalizations and participation therein are thus also determined by the history of the organization which capitalizes on experience. Hence, process managers and participants must also select the appropriate instruments or even create them. However,



the use of instruments is not an end in itself since experience capitalization is not limited to the routine application of methods and procedures. The results of having applied any such instruments must be **interpreted**, compared and **evaluated** in order to suitably serve as a basis for planning changes.

Brief and quick experience capitalization

In the scope of smaller projects or a community of practice, or when very specific questions are formulated within complex structures or systems, experience capitalization can be performed quickly (within days), with a minimum of logistics and without elaborate process structuring.

The experience holders (EH) themselves, i.e. those directly involved, can realize this form of experience capitalization without external support. The enlistment of process supporters (PS) is only required when time resources are limited.

Appropriate methods for rapid experience capitalization processes include brainstorming sessions; surveys; and previously realized, easy self-evaluations in the sense of the SWOT procedure (S = success, W = weakness, O = opportunities, T = threats), etc.

This type of experience capitalization can be realized in the form of short workshops, written questionnaires or interviews, etc., and should take advantage of any already-scheduled events in the scope of projects and the SDC's annual, country and medium-term programs, including annual planning, mid-year and mid-term reviews, etc.

Comprehensive and far-reaching experience capitalization

Basic adaptations of projects and programs, of concepts and strategies and their thematic orientation require a more broadly structured experience capitalization process which extends over weeks or even months. It may get by without a central event and without all participants encountering each other face-to-face.

When required, external experts (who may have only an indirect connection to the theme of the experience capitalization process) may also be enlisted as experience holders, in addition to those directly involved, to the employees from the regional offices and from Headquarters. In any case, external advisors must receive a clear mandate to function as process supporters based on a detailed functional specification.





Depending on the need, all available instruments can be used in comprehensive experience capitalization to record, present and consolidate experiences. These include, for example, brainstorming sessions, surveys, interviews and consultations, previously realized self- or internal evaluations, cross-sectional evaluations, partner analyses, case studies, the evaluation of existing documents, cognitive mapping, portfolio analyses, scenario techniques, etc.

Usually this procedure cannot be completed within a few events (integrated, most of the time, within the framework of other events). Instead, it requires detailed process planning, with clearly defined stages, responsibilities and the presentation of intermediate results, etc. In comprehensive experience capitalization, it is imperative that participants be informed of (intermediate) results, and that they are invited to assess and comment on them as soon as a first synthesis of results achieved in the process has become available. The respective feedbacks flow into the experience capitalization process and its final results. Such concluding feedback rounds help to bring about a consensus (or to determine differences) in addition to having participants support the final results.



Organizing the experience capitalization process

SDC defines experience capitalizations as one of its key processes in a table (overview):

Experience Capitalization (EC)				
	Who with whom?	Tasks	What to think about?	F Department
Identification of Needs	Geographical and specialist divisions / cooperation offices (COOFs) / in certain cases external experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Determine objective and purpose (required knowledge). ■ Decide if and what type of experiences should be systematically capitalized. ■ Define expected output. ■ Set the time frame. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are people open to EC and to change? ■ Is there a willingness to make investments? ■ Are changes possible (time!)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Supports the identification of needs. ■ Stands behind the objective.
Planning	COOFs / geographical and specialist divisions / in certain cases external support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Precisely formulate the objective of EC and how results will be applied. ■ Define fields to be observed and key questions. ■ Determine the process, length and rhythm. ■ Appoint those in charge, select participants and beneficiaries and other interested parties. Define their roles and earmark the required resources. ■ Select instruments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ EC guide ■ Goal orientation: the more precise the question, the clearer and more implementation-oriented the EC process. ■ Be realistic! Plan expenditures and instruments in line with defined needs and objectives. ■ Time frame: plan short processes! ■ Transparency: EC is more efficient when the interests of participants are laid open on the table. ■ Do not capitalize experience for others! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Supports a detailed objective. ■ Supports detailed planning. ■ Co-defines participation, roles and resources. ■ Selects instruments.
Implementation and Support	Experience holders with supporting group (COOFs / geographical and specialist divisions / invited partners / in certain cases external support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that experience holders retain ownership. ■ Define process management. ■ Document results. ■ Synthesize results. ■ Discuss results with experience holders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ EC is a learning process. ■ The EC process should not be misused to assert individual interests. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Controls the process. ■ Documents results. ■ Consults and synthesizes.
Change Practices	COOFs / divisions / departments / COOFs with local partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Plan the application of capitalized experiences. ■ Make decisions on strategy and/or practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ EC is not an end in itself, but rather a basis for making change and planning improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Advises during implementation phase. ■ Applies results in quality system assessments (QSA), etc.

Stages

It makes sense to divide experience capitalization processes into four stages:

1. Identification of needs
2. Planning
3. Implementation (and support)
4. Change of practice

It is important to understand that any preliminary and follow-up procedures are part of the experience capitalization process. Without clarification of the need, careful planning and the implementation of results, i.e., without the application of any knowledge gained in a (changed) procedure, experience capitalizations are incomplete. At the same time, processes should be kept as brief as possible – capitalization does not necessarily improve with longer process times.



Identifying the goal and theme

A prerequisite for the success of experience capitalization is the clear definition of a goal. The theme of experience capitalization must also be defined. Frequently, experience capitalization focuses on very specific aspects identified as needing revision and which are of more interest than large-scale or global topics. The more precisely these are formulated, the more solid will be the basis provided by the experience capitalization process for the planning and implementation of any changes.

Participation

Participants must be selected in accordance with the nature and demands of the respective experience capitalization process and the changes to which it should contribute. Two roles must be coordinated with one another: The experience holders and the process supporters.

Process quality

Regarding planning experience capitalization, there is a contradiction. On one hand, they need to be planned as precisely as possible; on the other, they remain learning processes with a limited scope for planning. Experience capitalizations are unpredictable, dynamic ventures because of their participative structure. By involving various players with diverging interests and perspectives, the objective is to illuminate all the different experiences and assessments rather than reach a consensus. It is not wise to strive for agreement on experiences; on the contrary, the presentation of different experiences should foster discussion among the players and thus enrich the process of experience capitalization.

Timing – experience capitalization and project, i.e. program cycle management

Experience capitalization taps into past experiences in order to adapt future practices and is thus basically future-oriented. In other words, capitalizing on experience is a meaningful process when a need for change exists and when the opportunities to initiate change are actually given. In cases where estimates reveal only a small chance for change to even take place within a program or project, experience capitalization is superfluous. For example, the end of projects and programs is not a suitable moment to carry out experience capitalizations because there is no longer any leeway for changing an unsatisfactory procedure.

By comparison, the most significant opportunities for capitalizing on experiences are given during periods of crisis in medium- and long-term projects and programs, as well as during routine planning. Nevertheless, systematic experience capitalization is not necessarily a part of managing project and program cycles since many of these do well without it. But whenever experience capitalization is realized in the scope of routine project sequences, it should consider and use such significant milestones as planning sessions, mid-year and mid-term reviews, etc. Experience capitalization is always used in organizational learning processes.

Participants and roles

Experience holders: The most important players in experience capitalization processes are the experience holders themselves. Not only do they own the process and its results, they are also concerned with making capitalized experiences available to third parties. Experience holders initiate the experience capitalization process, define its objectives and integrate their knowledge and experiences into the process. Often, they – or at least some of them – are also responsible for implementing capitalized experiences. In other words, they are the ones who change their own practice.

Process supporters: External players who are not necessarily familiar with the contents of an experience capitalization theme can be called in to support the experience holders in the



process of capitalizing on their experiences. They can provide advice on the **structure of the experience capitalization process**, document intermediate and final results, and may even participate in planning the implementation of capitalized experiences.

Other participants: Besides experience holders and process supporters, other functions can be involved in experience capitalization, e.g., external experts who support the validation of consolidated experiences, those responsible for change processes, decision-makers, as well as persons and functions entrusted with transfer and networking tasks.

Further documents:

Guide to Thematic Experience Capitalization. SDC, 2005; available as flyer (short version, 6 pages) and as brochure with case studies (long version, 32 pages). Print versions available from SDC, Thematic and Technical Resources Department, CH 3003 Berne, e-mail thematicinfo@deza.admin.ch.

Experience within SDC:

Reto Wieser, Senior Advisor, Social Development Division

What did I use it for?

Based on five case studies, SODEV led a process of experience capitalization on the key question "How to reach the poorest?". Spread over one year, the process was intended to be an internal learning process with transferable results. Based on documents, some interviews with directly involved people, individual reflection and four workshops the outcome is a six page document, describing the process on three pages and the results in form of FAQ (frequently asked questions) on another three. The biggest challenge of the facilitator was to keep the attention focused on the initial key question. A carefully agreed process design was a key to success.

The time used for this capitalisation is about 20 days for the coordinator and 5 to 8 days for each of the 12 participants, in total roughly 100 days.

What is the quality of results?

The FAQ (frequently asked questions), resumed on three pages is reader friendly and easily transferable to other situations. The topic is part of the mid-term strategy of the division. The process -- internally facilitated by a SODEV member -- led to a change of mindset among the participants: Reaching the poorest well present in the mind of all.

Annemarie Sancar, Gender Advisor, Governance Division

What do I use it for?

For the last two years we are engaged in experience capitalization in the field of gender mainstreaming in the Latin America programme. A Community of Practice composed of members of the gender desk (F-division), gender focal point within Latin America Section at headquarter and gender focal point in the cooperation offices conducts a balanced process including both, structured as well as open elements. The annual workshop is a "moment fort", taking stock of and documenting the capitalized experience so far and defining further steps.

What is the quality of results?

The motivated community acquired a common language and defined relevant lessons learnt, based on long lasting local experience. Within the community, there is a lot of good mutual support and coaching.

