

Avoid The Void: Continuity Confidence Starts With Capturing Critical Knowledge

Build operational resilience and protect your organization from key-person dependencies by documenting essential institutional knowledge before it's lost.

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Early in Judy Ramirez's facilities career, she met Jim. Judy had just transitioned from managing stores to working on the corporate side, with no real understanding of maintenance or repairs. She was essentially thrown into the deep end before she could swim.

Jim and another colleague were assigned to a wide range of issues. Their quote queues were always backed up, but they never seemed rattled, and no one was really watching them closely anyway. The workload felt chaotic, unstructured, and overwhelming. The competing priorities and constant issues were enough to overwhelm almost anybody. But Jim showed everyone how to navigate a never-ending stream of unpredictable problems.

“Jim cursed like a sailor; he was set in his ways, and his main goal was to make it to retirement so he could play golf while his back still let him,” Judy explained. “But there were also things I absolutely needed to learn from him, like how to read plumbing drawings and how to think like a detective when diagnosing facilities. He walked me through mechanical systems in a way no formal training ever did. He had strong opinions that were rooted in years of examining imperfect options.

“Jim was a walking archive of hard-earned knowledge,” Judy recalled. “Even if he always smelled faintly like cigarettes and last night’s pasta.”

Over the years, Judy has met many “Jims.” Different names, same archetype. At some point, she realized that she had become a bit of a Jim herself.

“When you spend enough time in this field, you accumulate patterns, edge cases, and lessons that only show up every few years — but when they do, they matter. That knowledge becomes an asset. It’s technical, operational, and often invisible until the exact moment you need it,” Judy noted.

But the reality is, the built environment is changing.

Retaining Critical Knowledge

“With the help of AI, we can turn those conversations into something searchable, organized, and reusable. We can even build internal agents — maybe we call it the ‘Jim Machine’ where every insight, lesson learned, and obscure fix becomes part of a living, breathing knowledge base. That way, when Jim eventually retires, his knowledge doesn’t just disappear,” Judy explained.

As veteran facility managers retire, change jobs, or are downsized, decades of undocumented building knowledge are going away with them. Critical information about shutoffs, repairs, equipment quirks, and emergency response plans can be wiped out overnight.

This loss of essential institutional knowledge creates operational risks for hospitals, schools, and commercial buildings, impacting everything from repair times to safety procedures.

However, forward-thinking organizations are capturing this institutional knowledge before it disappears by centralizing drawings, floor plans, equipment data, and field experience into one mobile platform.

What gets documented today determines how resilient facility teams will be tomorrow.

“If there’s one shift I’d advocate for across facility teams, it’s this: treat knowledge capture as part of the job, not an afterthought,” Judy stated. “Because the goal isn’t just to run strong

operations today; it's to make sure the next person stepping into your role isn't starting from zero but building on everything you've already learned."

Documenting The "Why"

Justin Gallo, Facilities and Administrative Services Manager at the Daniels Fund, took over a building that his predecessor had opened and managed for nearly 20 years. The previous person carried a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge, but they never actually met, like two ships passing in the night.

"There were plenty of files, some going back to when the building was built in 2002, but the biggest challenges were the small, practical things that were not clearly documented -- things like shut-off valves hidden above ceilings, incomplete maintenance logs, inconsistent work records, and unique workarounds that had been created over time," Justin said. "One air handler had a wired stop/start button that needed to be pushed every time the VFD was reset. It made sense once you learned it, but it was the kind of thing only someone with history in the building would know."

Buildings don't always behave the way you expect them to. Technicians spend a lot of time trying to figure out, "Why does the building do this when I do that?" System surprises are often revealed when systems reach the end of their life cycle. Sometimes a replacement is not just a replacement because you discover nontraditional integrations or workarounds that affect other parts of the building.

One thing Justin, Judy, and other facility team members wish their colleagues would document better is the "why." Facility teams are usually good at saving the proposal, the invoice, and the closeout documents, but the next person may not understand why the decision was made in the first place.

Preparing For The Future

Every project should have a "Future Facility Manager" section that answers: What should the next person know before they change, replace, or remove what we just built?

The industry is moving in the right direction as increased value is placed on building information, from outside vendors to team members to first responders. Because buildings outlast the people who construct and maintain them, the documentation behind decades of changes must always be easy to locate and revise.

Organizations can no longer afford to have critical knowledge gaps. With a great deal of complexity and levels of accountability, details need to be captured and preserved before a single departure creates downtime and leaves new team members scrambling for a solution.

According to IFMA, more than 45% of facility management professionals globally are expected to retire within the next decade. Continuity will be tested as team leaders move on. But successful organizations will display operational resilience by preparing for change with extensive documentation.