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What is Silo Mentality and How Can You Keep it Out of Your Company?



About Us:

aiaTranslations LLC is the leading provider of specialized life sciences translation. With a global network of medical linguists, aiaTranslations can provide translations for projects ranging from clinical trials through commercialization and market research.



When a company has communication issues between departments, a phenomenon known as “silo mentality” can occur. Departments will keep their own stores of knowledge “siloe” away, even though everyone in the company should share the same vision and goals.

Although the term was coined fairly recently, silo mentality has existed for a long time. For business experts like Brent Gleeson¹ and Ian and Francoise Henderson², it’s even to be expected as a business grows and expands.

BusinessDictionary.com’s definition of silo mentality³ goes so far as to include a warning: “This type of mentality will reduce efficiency of the overall operation, reduce morale, and contribute to the demise of a productive company culture.”

How can managers fight this seemingly natural aspect of corporate life? And why is it especially important to be on the lookout for silo mentality when it comes to pharma and translation?

1 Gleeson, Brent, The Silo Mentality: How To Break Down Barriers, Forbes Online, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2013/10/02/the-silo-mentality-how-to-break-down-the-barriers/#644768288c7e>

2 Henderson Ian, Henderson, Francoise, Translating Your Product for The Global Market? Beware of The Silo Effect, Global Trade Online, <https://www.globaltrademag.com/translating-your-product-for-the-global-market-beware-the-silo-effect/>

3 <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/silo-mentality.html>

What causes silo mentality?

There are many different reasons why silo mentality can exist in an organization. These include:

Large-scale projects

Some projects involve so many groups and branches that it's difficult to coordinate communication. Information and even methods for different processes are essentially blocked from being shared across an organization.

Deliberate secrecy

In certain cases, a company may deliberately ask certain employees not to share information or ideas. There are a number of reasons why this may occur. For example, the project may involve sensitive scientific, legal, or government-related information.

Not understanding the importance of sharing information within an organization

This is probably the most common reason for silo mentality. If departments are isolated, common goals aren't stated, and/or a company fosters an environment of silence or hostility between departments, it's unlikely that ideas, rules, results, and discoveries will be shared or clearly communicated.





Not understanding the importance of sharing information with outsourced workers and teams

Although these workers may not be permanent, salaried employees, a lack of information or clear channels of communication will make it easy to create their own silos, which can have far-reaching effects.

For example, if an organization sends out material to be translated by outsourced translators or translation companies, specific instructions or a style guide may not be included. This can lead to disparities in translated materials, including differing terminology, tone, and style in work turned in by different teams.

Rivalry between coworkers and teams

Sometimes silo mentality can be healthy or expected. For instance, in an advertising firm, employees may keep their pitches secret from one another until they present them. This allows for more creativity and more options for clients. But it can be unhealthy, especially in industries like pharma, where it's essential for organizations to understand all aspects of their products, from what they contain, to their use(s), as well as how patient education and advertising are being approached.

Silo mentality in pharma: A major threat

In pharma, silo mentality can cause major issues for corporations and the scientific community – not to mention patients.

Business developer and biologist Dr. Paul Overton⁴ lists several examples of silo mentality's dangerous effects on pharma companies. These include:

- decision-making based on incomplete or out-of-date information
- increased workload due to time required to check and fix errors
- critical data that goes unlisted, shutting down drug development
- unnecessary duplication of data, resulting in a waste of time, effort, and resources
- bad decision-making regarding project direction, due to an absence of information
- critical data neglected or not mentioned because no one has communicated its importance
- missed deadlines due to extra time needed for correcting errors
- outcomes that do not meet the desired goals or specifications

One example of the latter is preclinical trials that haven't been planned correctly, due to a lack of communication about details such as their relevance to a drug project. These insufficient studies can cause questions to arise regarding a product's safety. In many cases, a product may be safe, yet testing failed to accurately reflect this.

4 Overton, Dr. Paul, *Breaking Down Silos in Drug Development – Why interdisciplinary integration is fundamental for pharma's future*, Drug Discovery World Online, <https://www.ddw-online.com/drug-discovery/p321759-breaking-down-silos-in-drug-development-why-interdisciplinary-integration-is-fundamental-for-pharma-s-future.html>



When silo mentality and medical translation meet

Outsourcing tasks such as translation has become common practice in most industries today. Overton reports that in pharma alone, it's estimated that outsourcing will become a \$43.7 billion industry by 2026, up from \$19.2 billion in 2016.

However, because external service providers aren't encouraged to communicate with most organizations, outsourcing will only increase the problem of silo mentality.

Ian and Francoise Henderson have closely analyzed the effects of silo mentality and translation. Some of the problems that arise when the two meet include:

- translation of the same information by multiple departments, resulting in unnecessary translation costs
- packaging that doesn't indicate the same information as the product's marketing material
- unvetted translations that violate legal restrictions in overseas markets
- disparities that could result in confusion, misuse, and massive lawsuits or bans from certain markets.

For example, Francoise Henderson cites a project in which a product's ingredients were listed differently in advertising material and medical labels. The formula had been changed because some ingredients were banned in Europe, but this hadn't been communicated to all of the departments working on the product release.

How to stop silo mentality

Because silo mentality is a natural part of the evolution of a company, it may seem inevitable. But there are ways to stop it or to minimize its impact.

One thing that most experts agree on is fostering an environment of easy communication between departments. Depending on your organization, this may mean occasional meetings between department heads, as well as social and team-building activities.

Creating a space that promotes organic interaction⁵, such as an open-space work environment, a cafeteria, or a shared rest area, is another strategy to consider.

Another frequently suggested strategy for stopping or minimizing silo mentality is to state and regularly reinforce a vision and common goal for your organization.

On a more specific level, when dealing with outsourced translations, organizations should use a reliable and long-term translation partner. Working with a translation partner that values terminology management and translation memory management is another way to stop silos from being built.

Silo mentality may seem inevitable in large organizations. But its potentially devastating effects, especially in industries like pharma, make it something worth fighting to avoid.

Get to know the different departments in your organization. Unify them with a common vision and company-wide goal. Break down the silos by promoting interaction between employees in all sectors.

When outsourcing translation tasks, try to work with a long-term translation partner who prioritizes organization of systems such as translation memory.

The end result will be increased efficiency, less needless spending, and a better understanding of your product, both within your organization and in your market.



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4387 W. Swamp Road #556
Doylestown, PA 18902 USA

www.aiaTranslations.com
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