Chapter III
Tapping Tacit Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the concept of ‘tacit knowledge’ and how organizations can foster the sharing and exchange of tacit knowledge. Various views of tacit knowledge are discussed and a framework is developed distinguishing different conceptualizations of knowledge and how different types of knowledge are acquired, held in memory, and manifested. An understanding of these distinctions can aid in determining the best approach for transferring tacit knowledge and skills at the individual and organizational levels. Finally, I review various tacit knowledge transfer approaches based on the distinctions identified in the framework and discuss their suitability for different aspects of tacit knowledge transfer.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, firms are turning to management of their knowledge assets for gaining a competitive edge in the market place (Coff, Coff, & Eastvold, 2006; Nonaka, 1994). As one would expect, the term “tacit knowledge” arises often in discussions of management of an organization’s knowledge, but it is frequently used with inadequate definition as a catch-all phrase for any knowledge that is not formally recorded (Styhre, 2004). The notion of tacit knowledge is intuitively appealing and seems to be something that we all instinctively understand as the knowledge that people have in their heads, rather than knowledge that is written down and recorded (Koenig, 2003). However, as Day (2005) notes, this ‘folk-psychology’ notion of tacit knowledge is simplistic and leads to the
expectation that tacit knowledge can easily be transferred simply by having the knowledge holder reflect on and articulate the knowledge. In fact, the real concept of tacit knowledge remains ambiguous, with researchers applying the term with a variety of meanings and characterizations. Consequently, there is some confusion and debate over what tacit knowledge is, and is not, and whether or not it can be ‘captured’ or articulated (Berry & Dienes, 1993; Castillo, 2002; Tsoukas, 2003). This ambiguity brings significant challenges for firms as they manage and attempt to transfer the tacit dimensions of knowledge within their organizations.

This chapter aims to bring some clarification to the proliferation of ideas and interpretations surrounding the idea of tacit knowledge. I firstly give an overview of the historical beginnings of the tacit knowledge concept, and then review the related concept of implicit learning. In the following section, I discuss various categories of tacit and explicit knowledge that have been proposed by researchers, and develop a framework of categories of knowledge, based on distinctions it is useful to make in order to understand the various aspects of knowledge that might be managed within an organization. In particular, I identify how different types of knowledge are manifested, i.e., how we know that a particular dimension of knowledge actually exists, and how different aspects of knowledge can be acquired. Such a categorization is essential if we are to understand how to identify and transfer knowledge within organizations. Finally, I review approaches that can be used in the business domain to transfer the different dimensions of tacit knowledge identified in the framework.

HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS

The origin of the tacit knowledge concept is usually attributed to Polanyi (1966), who laid a theoretical foundation, and coined the often quoted phrase “we can know more than we can tell”. Drawing on Ryle’s work (1949), Polanyi focused on two dimensions of knowing, “knowing what” and “knowing how”, arguing that these two aspects of knowing are always both present in any instance of a person’s knowledge. According to Polanyi, we know that tacit knowledge exists because we can see the practical outcomes of its application and can thus infer that there must be some implicit or tacit knowledge that the person has but cannot articulate. Polanyi argued that the aim of explicitly and objectively formalizing all knowledge may not be achievable, as the implicit or tacit aspects of knowledge cannot be fully replicated as formal explicit knowledge.

More recently, the knowledge management literature has been heavily influenced by Nonaka’s (1994) Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Integration (SECI) model of knowledge conversion. With this model, Nonaka proposes that knowledge creation occurs through a process of socialization between individuals to share tacit knowledge; externalization to translate or convert individual tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge; combination to capture and disseminate new explicit knowledge; and internalization, whereby the organization’s explicit knowledge is internalized by individuals so that it becomes tacit again. However, empirical evidence examining the conditions that support the SECI process stages, particularly the externalization stage, is limited (Gourlay, 2006a) and the model has come under increasing criticism as being based on a flawed understanding of the nature of tacit knowledge and the degree to which it can be articulated and ‘translated’ into explicit knowledge (Gourlay, 2006a; Keane & Mason, 2006; Tsoukas, 2003). While these criticisms have been primarily based on philosophical arguments, empirical research in the cognitive psychology field on implicit learning suggests that the extent to which tacit knowledge can be articulated depends, at least in part, on the way in which the tacit knowledge was originally acquired.
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