Chapter XVI

Eliciting Tacit Knowledge Using the Critical Decision Interview Method

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Abstract

Interest in the capture of tacit knowledge within organizations has risen in recent years. However, while the capture of explicit knowledge is relatively straightforward, methods for eliciting tacit knowledge are less well-developed. This chapter briefly overviews a number of strategies for eliciting tacit knowledge and then provides a detailed examination of one of these strategies: the critical decision interview approach. The critical decision interview method can assist expert respondents to articulate tacit knowledge by probing beyond their espoused theories about their actions to reveal their practice. Tacit knowledge then can be identified by contrasting respondents’ practices with theoretical prescriptions for best practice in the field. The application of the method in an investigation of risk management in IT projects is described, and the effectiveness of this method for surfacing tacit knowledge is discussed.
Introduction

In recent years, there has been rapidly growing interest in the management of organizational knowledge, and significant attention has focused on individual employees’ tacit knowledge and the question of how this tacit knowledge can be surfaced and shared or retained within the firm (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Malhotra, 2000; Nonaka, 1994). While there has been a recognition that employees’ tacit knowledge first must be made explicit before it can be managed (Nonaka, 1994; Walsham, 2001), less attention has been paid to methods of eliciting tacit knowledge and helping to make it explicit. Most researchers agree that, at best, tacit knowledge is difficult for its holder to articulate and that respondents’ theories of action (in Argyris and Schön’s terminology, 1978) may well be different from their actual practice. A key requirement for the capture of tacit knowledge, therefore, is a knowledge elicitation technique that has the potential to prompt and assist a respondent to recall and articulate tacit knowledge and to get beyond the theories or rationalizations that a person may use to explain his or her actions.

In this chapter, I show how the critical decision interview method can aid in eliciting tacit aspects of knowledge from expert practitioners, and I illustrate its use in a research project investigating tacit knowledge in the field of risk management in IT projects. I begin by discussing issues related to tacit knowledge elicitation and the key requirements of a tacit knowledge elicitation method and briefly review possible knowledge elicitation strategies. Then I describe the critical decision interview method, show how it meets the key requirements, and discuss implementation and analysis procedures. Next, I describe the application of the method in a recent research project investigating tacit knowledge in risk management of IT projects. I discuss the results obtained and reflect on the effectiveness of the method as it was applied in that project. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the effectiveness and limitations of the method as a tacit knowledge elicitation tool.

Tacit Knowledge Elicitation

The concept of tacit knowledge has been used by researchers in a wide range of disciplines with a corresponding variety of meanings and characterizations. Consequently, there is some confusion in the literature over the exact definition of tacit knowledge and its relationship to similar concepts, such as implicit learning, procedural knowledge, and practical intelligence (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Berry & Dienes, 1993; Castillo, 2002). While some researchers regard tacit knowledge as completely inarticulable and, therefore, unlikely to be transferable explicitly to other individuals (Tsoukas, 2003), most theorists view the tacit-explicit dimension as a continuum (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Berry & Dienes, 1993; Castillo, 2002; Keane & Mason, 2006; Leonard & Sensiper, 1998; Polanyi, 1966; Reber, 1993) or as two dimensions present in all knowledge (Stenmark, 2002) and, hence, argue that, depending on the degree of tacitness, tacit aspects of knowledge can be surfaced. Nonaka (1994) and Takeuchi (2001) believe that tacit knowledge includes both technical skills and cognitively based knowledge, and argue that cognitive tacit knowledge can be made at least partially explicit by the use of metaphor, analogy, and prototype. Sternberg and
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