A Critical Decision Interview Approach to Capturing Tacit Knowledge: Principles and Application

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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 paper describes how 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 can then be identified by contrasting respondents’ practice 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.

Keywords: critical decision interview method; IS project risk management; knowledge acquisition; qualitative research; tacit knowledge

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 must first 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 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 get beyond the theories or rationalizations that a person may use to explain his or her actions.

In this paper I show how a critical decision interview method can aid in eliciting tacit knowledge from “expert” practitioners and illustrate its use in a research project investigating tacit knowledge in the field of risk management in IT projects. This paper is structured into four main sections. First is a discussion of issues related to tacit knowledge elicitation and the key requirements of a tacit knowledge elicitation method, and a brief review of possible knowledge elicitation strategies that meet these key requirements. Second is a description of the critical decision interview method, a demonstration of how it meets the key requirements, and a discussion of implementation and analysis procedures. Third comes a description of the application of the method in a recent research project investigating tacit knowledge in risk management of IT projects, along with a discussion of the results obtained and reflection on the effectiveness of the method as it was applied in that project. And fourth is the conclusion, 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 explicitly transferable to other individuals (Tsoukas, 2003), most theorists view the tacit-explicit dimension as a continuum (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Berry & Dienes, 1993; Castillo, 2002; 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 Wagner (1986) and Klein, Calderwood and MacGregor (1989) have developed interview techniques based on the use of story-telling approaches to facilitate the elicitation of this type of tacit knowledge.

In applied management studies, there has been a lack of consistency in the operationalization of the tacit knowledge concept, and on what distinguishes tacit knowledge from explicit knowledge (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001; Castillo, 2002). However, one group of researchers, working with Sternberg and Wagner (Sternberg, Forsythe, Hedlund, Horvath, Wagner, Williams, et al., 2000; Sternberg & Horvath, 1999; Sternberg & Wagner, 1986) is notable both for developing a clear definition of its concept of tacit knowledge and for gathering a substantial body of empirical evidence to support the concept. This paper adopts the definition of tacit knowledge developed by Sternberg and his colleagues (Sternberg et al., 2000); namely,
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