Abstract

This study reviews the use of the term “tacit knowledge” in the knowledge management and broader management literature and argues that it is frequently used with an inadequate definition as a catch-all phrase for any knowledge that is not formally recorded. A framework of categories of knowledge is developed to clarify different authors’ conceptualizations of the tacit dimension of knowledge. This framework distinguishes between how different types of knowledge are acquired, manifested, and transferred. These are key distinctions for researchers aiming to investigate aspects of tacit knowledge. Two operationalizations of the tacit knowledge concept that have been applied in the business domain are discussed.

Keywords: declarative knowledge; explicit knowledge; implicit learning; procedural knowledge; tacit knowledge; tacit knowledge elicitation and transfer

Introduction

Growing interest in the management of knowledge within organizations has focused attention on the control of tacit knowledge, and in particular, the issue of how such knowledge can be retained within the firm as a source of possible competitive advantage (Coff, Coff & Eastvold, 2006; Nonaka, 1994). 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). In many cases, it seems that tacit knowledge is simply used as a catch-all phrase for any knowledge that has not been formally and explicitly recorded (Styhre, 2004). 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 article attempts to bring some clarification to the proliferation of ideas and interpreta-
tions 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 concepts of implicit learning, and declarative and procedural knowledge. 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 that are 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, that is, how we know that a particular dimension of knowledge actually exists, and how different aspects of knowledge can be acquired and transferred. Such a categorization is essential if we are to understand how to identify and transfer knowledge within organizations. Finally, I review two approaches to operationalization of aspects of tacit knowledge in the business domain. In particular, I discuss the definition of tacit knowledge developed by Sternberg, Forsythe, Hedlund, Horvath, Wagner, Williams et al. (2000) and their critical incident approach to the elicitation of individual tacit knowledge, and Ambrosini’s (2003) articulation of organizational tacit knowledge as tacit routines and her use of causal mapping techniques to reveal these routines.

HISTORICAL BEGINNINGS
The study of tacit knowledge originated from the philosophical work of 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 argued that there are two aspects of knowing, “knowing what” and “knowing how”, and that these two aspects of knowing are always both present in any instance of a person’s knowledge. However, frequently we are able to articulate what we know without being able to explain how we know. For example, we can easily say whether we recognize a person’s face, but we are generally unable to explain how we know that the face is a familiar one. Thus, 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. Using the example of a skilled car driver, Polanyi maintained that even if we focus on thoroughly and explicitly specifying the (tacit) knowledge that the driver uses to complete a complicated maneuver, another person will not be able to replicate the maneuver just by studying the explicit instructions. Thus, 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.

While Polanyi set a philosophical foundation for the concept of tacit knowledge he said little about the processes of acquiring or learning tacit knowledge. Two major lines of research in the cognitive psychology field have involved implicit learning and the processes of skills acquisition.

IMPlicit LEARNING
Implicit learning has been the focus of a wide range of studies in the social sciences. Implicit learning occurs when a person acquires knowledge without a conscious attempt to do so, and largely without explicit awareness of what was acquired (Reber, 1993). Thus, it is difficult for the person to articulate or describe the resulting knowledge acquired. There is some confusion in the literature over the implicit-explicit distinction, with some researchers referring to the type of knowledge possessed, while others refer to the different learning processes of acquiring knowledge (Berry & Dienes, 1993). In general, explicit knowledge is knowledge a person can easily explain or describe, while implicit or tacit knowledge is knowledge that a person may be unaware of having, and that is difficult to articulate. Explicit learning occurs in more formal teaching and learning settings or when conscious learning strategies are applied. In contrast, implicit learning occurs when a person acquires knowledge without the use of
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