

## Tacit Knowledge Transfer and Sharing: Characteristics and Benefits of Tacit & Explicit Knowledge

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### Abstract

Knowledge is generally divided into two: Explicit (articulate) and Tacit. This article thus explores the concept of tacit knowledge and the role that it plays in learning institutions and business organizations. Evidently, tacit knowledge is linked to knowledge management and as such, the world should utilize it for resilience-building and sustainable development. Notably, due to its complex nature, acquiring and extracting tacit knowledge is not easy as it is an unspoken, unwritten and hidden in people and ultimately leads to the well-being and success of individuals in society. Accordingly, tacit knowledge is very personalised, contextual and hard to communicate or transfer from one person to another by the process of verbal expression or writing and is generally made up of values, perceptions and beliefs. It is obtainable and transferrable through direct interaction amongst individuals and their environments. This paper, thus, explores tacit knowledge and assesses its role and significance in the advancement, enhancement and sustenance of learning and performances in business organisations and learning institutions. Accordingly, approximately 90% of the total knowledge in an organization is held in tacit form, ultimately, impacting the overall output and effectiveness of institutions and organizations.

**Keywords:** *Benefits, Tacit knowledge, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer.*

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### Introduction

Knowledge is the most important resource in the 21st century and crucial for institutions (including higher education institutions) and business organisations in building sustenance, resilience and maintaining a competitive edge over others. This, thus, calls for complete leverage of all knowledge resources in order to develop strategic plans for institutional expansion and growth (Suppiah & Sandhu 2010). Accordingly, knowledge is considered the most significant institutional resource for the long-term success and sustainable competitive advantage (Awad & Ghaziri, 2007). Notably, knowledge interacts between experiences, facts, skills, values and thinking (Mládková 2012). Notably, knowledge is divided into two types: **explicit and tacit knowledge**. Accordingly, data from various databases, encoded information, stored and/or disseminated all fall under explicit knowledge (Mahmood et al. 2011). As a result, explicit knowledge is easily coded, shared or transferred.

On the other hand, **tacit knowledge** is knowledge that is held by individuals but not easily expressed. It is highly personal, specific, contextual and hard to communicate or transfer from one person to another by the process of verbal expression or writing and is not captured by mathematics or language and generally made up of values, mental models, perceptions beliefs insights and assumptions (Davenport & Prusak 2000, Nonaka & Nishiguchi 2001). Mládková (2012) also contends that tacit knowledge is difficult to visualize, write down or transfer from one person to another and plays a significant role in the knowledge-oriented research. Speaking our own languages, being able to ride a bicycle, cook without seeing a recipe are all examples of tacit knowledge (Phelps et al. 2012). Studies have emphasized the importance of tacit knowledge and indicated that greater effort must geared toward tapping on it for the good of humanity as it has a significant role to play in the existence of mankind (Beesley & Cooper 2008; Dampney et al, 2002). In the knowledge management and institutional domains, tacit knowledge is vital in learning advancement and enhancement, human resource management, media studies and social psychology (Takeuchi & Nonaka 2004). Apparently, tacit knowledge is connected to terms such as know-how, skills, working-knowledge, and high level of expertise (Irick, 2007; Crowley 2001). Accordingly, decision-making efficiency, customer service and the accuracy of task performance and accomplishment can all be enhanced by the use of tacit knowledge. Additionally, tacit knowledge increases the quality of the work (Goffin & Koners, 2011).

The term ‘tacit knowledge’ was first introduced by the Hungarian philosopher and physician Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) in 1958. Polanyi (1958) famously summarized tacit knowledge in his book ‘The Tacit Dimension’ with the assertion that “We can know more than we can tell” (Polanyi 1966).

### **Methodology**

A systematic review of literature on tacit knowledge was conducted from institutional websites and journals and grouped thematically according to the pre-determined flow of this paper.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results of the review are discussed under 4 sections, namely: properties/characteristics of tacit knowledge, tacit knowledge sharing, difficulties in tacit knowledge sharing and benefits of sharing tacit knowledge.

#### ***Properties/characteristics of tacit knowledge***

Several authors (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000; McAdam et al. 2007 & Pavlicek, 2009) indicate that tacit knowledge resides in both relations and human minds and is acquired by sharing experiences, imitation and observation. Accordingly tacit knowledge is also learnt through personal experience, apprenticeship, practice and reflection. Furthermore, Pavlicek (2009) explicates that tacit knowledge is rarely documented, highly personal, individual and hard to formalize. Other properties include:

- Difficult to see, unstructured, hard to estimate, codify, write down, formalize, investigate, capture and communicate accurately.
- It is a less familiar, unconventional form of knowledge and rooted in procedures, action, commitment, emotions and values etc.
- It is learnt through experiences, intuitive feeling, skills, observation, values, mental modes and beliefs.
- It is experience-based (knowledge-in-action and mostly unconscious and invisible (both known and unknown to the holder).
- It is non-communicable in a language.
- It is transferred through storytelling, conversation, discussions, demonstrations and analogies.
- It is subjective, practical, know-how, job specific, context-specific, experience-based, here and now, and expert’s knowledge. , is difficult to learn

#### ***Tacit Knowledge Sharing***

Knowledge sharing is the process through which knowledge held by an individual is converted into a form that can be absorbed, understood and utilized by other individuals through networks and channels between knowledge seekers and providers (Hong et al. 2011). Since tacit knowledge is theory based, it is more difficult to share as compared to explicit knowledge. Notably, explicit knowledge can be transmitted in ordinary, formal, systematic language and is theory-based. Consequently, the main objective of tacit knowledge sharing is to create new knowledge (Mongkolajala et al. 2012). The organised and systematic process of acquiring, sustaining and renewing employees’ tacit knowledge has guaranteed survival of organizations in robust economic environments. Studies suggest that effort should be directed at converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through externalization to make it shareable (Majewska & Szulczyńska, 2014; Bucsh et al, 2001). On the other hand, Goffin and Koners (2011) suggest that the possessor of tacit knowledge must first become conscious of the knowledge possessed and then determine ways of sharing it. Accordingly, it is only after this occurs can the sharing of the knowledge occur.

Evidently, as tacit knowledge is usually stored in peoples’ brains, sharing it is complex, difficult, and time consuming (Hislop 2009; Mládková 2012). By implication, approximately two-thirds of the knowledge and information received at work is automatically transformed into tacit knowledge through in-person, face to face and physical interactions such as, direct interaction, informal conversations, mentoring, stories, apprenticeship networking and internships (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, Teece 2000, Ivona 2009). Hence, to be able to share tacit knowledge, regular interaction, extensive personal contact and trust are required. Apparently tacit knowledge could also be harnessed or captured when the knowledge-bearer enlists in social or community practice or network and can only be revealed and expressed through practice in a particular context and shared through community and social networks (Goffin & Koners 2011).

Consequently, to enhance tacit knowledge-sharing, it is imperative to shape and create relationships amongst employees (social and group networks) that enables and enhance tacit knowledge exchange and sharing amongst individuals in the project (Fan & Ku 2010). Bloodgood and Salisbury (2001), contend that the process of tacit knowledge-sharing involves direct (sometimes indirect) personal collaboration and contact with others at the institutions and/or organisations. Subsequently, the transmission of tacit knowledge is performed through unconscious, collaborative knowledge sharing amongst the members of the organization (Majewska & Szulczyńska 2014). This could be during videoconferencing, e-mail exchanges, utilisation of databases, teleconferencing, real or virtual bulletin boards or through staff collaboration software like groupware (Majewska & Szulczyńska 2014). Accordingly, online discussions and social networking forums can validate critique and share collective empirical knowledge easily amongst organizations, institutions and individuals (Laudon & Laudon 2012).

### ***Tacit knowledge sharing in higher education***

Through the sharing of tacit knowledge, University educators and instructors can improve their researching knowledge and abilities and teaching skill. Accordingly, the capacity and ability of university instructors is reflected not only in the area of specialization and research but also in cultivating of talents and teaching (Semradova & Hubackova 2014). Thus, tacit knowledge as usually reflected in the process of researching and teaching is valuable and essential for the instructors (Venkitachalam & Busch 2012). Accordingly, tacit knowledge sharing processes in education occur in 3 ways according to Yu and Zhou (2015), these are: i) peer review ii) learning community iii) academic conference and, iv) thumb-a-lift

**a) Peer review:** Tacit knowledge sharing occurs when they university instructors submit papers, journal articles, books for review before publication. Tacit knowledge transfer also occurs when university lecturers apply for grants or have their instructional strategies evaluated (Singleton, 2015).

**b) Learning community:** This is done through the formation of a group of university academic staff who share skills, academic ideas, experiences, methods, attitudes and experience (Richlin and Cox 2004). Accordingly, the collaboration and cooperation of teachers with different skills, abilities and characters can share and motivate creative ideas that aid in problem solving problems (Yu & Zhou 2015).

**c) Thumb-a-lift:** exists in the tacit knowledge sharing activities of teachers. Academic fora, teaching blogs and discussion space are example of thumb-a-lift (Yu & Zhou 2015).

**d) Academic conference:** This is a popular mode of tacit knowledge transmission and sharing for educators and instructors (Sumi & Mase 2002). Some teachers prefer to communicate and share experiences and studies in national and international academic conferences. Here educators also get to listen to and communicate to other educators, thus getting to know their views and opinions (Yu & Zhou 2015).

### ***Difficulties in the Sharing of Tacit Knowledge***

The difficulties of sharing tacit knowledge are mostly as a result of language and perception, value, distance, time and distance (Smith, 2000; Nonaka & Konno 1998). These are forthwith discussed:

**a) Language and perception:** this are considered as the main difficulties in the sharing of tacit knowledge. As concerns language, the difficulty lies in the fact that tacit knowledge (that is always intangible) is always held in a non-verbal form. While perception, which essentially, is the unconsciousness about a problem or the aspect of not being aware of the full range of the phenomenon also interferes with its sharing.

**b) Time:** Bennett and Gabriel (1999) contend that the internalization of tacit knowledge requires a long time for individuals and organizations, which ultimately hampers sharing efforts as one might not have been immersed in it long enough.

**c) Value:** Value also creates barriers in sharing of tacit knowledge in that as much as in the globalized world knowledge has become a valuable asset that is a prerequisite in the growth of an organization, many types and forms of tacit knowledge, such as rule of the thumb and have yet to be considered valuable (Awad & Ghaziri, 2007).

**d) Distance:** More often than not, distance raises difficulties at the workplace. Accordingly, the need for face-to-face interaction for the sharing of tacit knowledge often creates difficulties in it. This is becoming more deficit with the advent of remote working or learning that has become common-place since in the advent of COVID-19 (Leonard & Sensiper 1998).

### **Benefits of Sharing Tacit Knowledge**

Sharing of tacit knowledge is beneficial to all institutions and organizations. Accordingly, tacit knowledge sharing provides a sustainable competitive edge to create and develop tangible assets as intellectual capital (Leonardi & Treem 2012). Moreover, the Sharing of tacit knowledge amongst employees is beneficial to the individuals, institutions and organizations as tacit knowledge would ultimately lead to the development of the organisation. The transfer and sharing of tacit knowledge is not easy (Laudon & Laudon 2012). Moreover, the Sharing of tacit knowledge may be disadvantageous to an individual in the sense that the individual may lose his competitive advantage over peers or it may end up providing incomplete information or track record (Stenmark 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Tacit knowledge is imperative because it builds expertise. Furthermore, tacit knowledge sharing is important for the growth and development of any institution or organization. The organizations and institutions should, take cognizant of the importance of tacit knowledge and take urgent steps to harness it for the growth and development of their entities.

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