

# Tacit Knowledge and Storytelling

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## Abstract

Tacit knowledge is - in addition to theoretical knowledge - indispensable in the field of high-qualified professional activity. Thus, work-related experience and tacit knowledge have become of vital interest for corporate management strategies. In the first part, this article highlights the theoretical fundamentals of tacit knowledge. In a further step we introduce the Storytelling approach and contrast it with the theoretical bases and implications concerning the handling of tacit knowledge. In conclusion, the conditions, opportunities and limits of a systematic dealing with tacit knowledge are summarized. The aim is to reach a better understanding about the challenges of dealing with tacit knowledge by using the instrument Storytelling.

**Keywords:** Tacit Knowledge, Experiential Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Storytelling

## Introduction

The extension and complexity of global trade today is tremendous. The increase in global trade – mainly because of information technology – comes along with changes of work and organizational structures [1] [2] [3]. Information modelling on the one hand and the development of knowledge on the other became important factors for most employees, companies and regions when dealing with the new conditions of capitalism [4] [5] [6].

Tacit knowledge is in addition to theoretical knowledge indispensable in the field of high-qualified professional activity. Thus, tacit

knowledge has become of vital interest for corporate management strategies. The first objective of this paper is to highlight the theoretical fundamentals of tacit knowledge. The second objective is to contrast the tacit knowledge perspective with the Storytelling approach. The aim is to reach a better understanding about the conditions, opportunities and challenges of dealing with tacit knowledge in the work context by using the instrument Storytelling.

## Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge is based on practical and concrete experiences in the working process. Tacit knowledge does not exist primarily in a formalized or accurately recordable mode and therefore it is not to be understood as a thing, an object or a tangible good. Because tacit knowledge is also built up by physical experiences and self participations, by empathy and mimesis, it often occurs unconsciously. Sensing with all senses and the ability to empathize are vital here. Being based both on experience and the ability to deal with new experiences tacit knowledge exceeds the level of being informed [7].

Tacit knowledge causes a keen sense for materials and machines, an accurate ear for noises made by machines, the ability to flash into action when something is going wrong or “looks bad”, the right instinct for sources of (technical) trouble and the talent of anticipating difficulties and faults within the workflow. Thus, tacit knowledge helps to apprehend, to interpret and to appraise a situation in its complexity [8] [9]. That means, tacit knowledge is connected with a process of knowing, it needs the knowing person namely not only in a rational-analytic man-

ner but also in a more associative course of action [10] [11].

Recent sociological studies highlight the significance of sensing with all senses, subjective estimations and experiences as well as an emotional fulfilling relationship to work. They show that tacit knowledge constitutes a central capacity of employees [12] [13] [14] [15] [16] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21]. The studies emphasize that for solving arising problems as quickly as possible, employees need a combination of theoretical knowledge, technical knowledge, vocational training, scientific education, experience, intuition, anticipation, instinct and the like. Therefore, forms of acting and knowing, which do not follow the logic rules of codified knowledge, are more helpful than disturbing for human work ability. That applies particularly to highly-trained knowledge workers, who have to be able to cope with changing conditions and influences on which they have to respond flexibly and innovatively.

Tacit knowledge is a term that was introduced by Michael Polanyi. From his point of view tacit knowledge is not a self-contained type of knowledge. Michael Polanyi argues that knowledge is bi-structured. He argues for the interrelation of a knowledge-background and -foreground. He sees knowledge as a combination of unconscious and conscious propositions, of implicit and explicit knowledge dimensions. Polanyi calls these two elements of knowledge Term 1 and Term 2 or proximal and distal term [22].

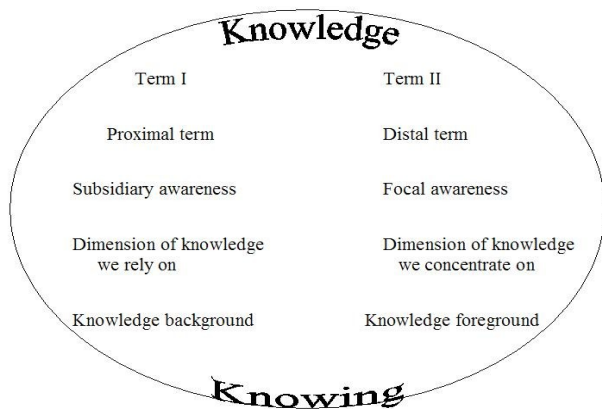


Figure: The structure of knowledge according to Polanyi

Knowing and skilful action is neither purely intuitive nor a calculative procedure. It may be highly conscious, but it doesn't necessarily follow clear and strict rules. We are not able to solve an unspecific problem on the basis of defined rules. And a problem solving expertise is often easier to show than to explain. For instance, a skilled worker can recognize a problem of a machine, but he need not be able to tell exactly how he did so [23]. According to this, "(...) the aim of a skilful performance is achieved by the observance of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them" [24]. That's why Polanyi said that "we know more than we can tell" [25]. And that means that knowledge has a core that remains implicit. Thus Polanyi concludes consequently that "all knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge. A wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable" [26]. Explicit knowledge must be tacitly understood to be knowledge. In Polanyi's view knowledge is always a cooperation of an explicit and implicit dimension.

## Storytelling

Some companies try to establish an ambitious and holistic knowledge management that should foster the processes of creating new knowledge. These efforts need to find ways of dealing with tacit knowledge. If we look at the debate about a systematic handling of experience and tacit knowledge in organizations there are many ideas, tools and methods being discussed. One prominent catchword here is Storytelling.

We can find different narrative methods like *Case Studies* [27], *Springboard Stories* [28], *Story Construction* by Snowden [29] or *Appreciate Inquiry* by Bensen/Maleh [30]. The method *Learning Histories* by Kleiner and Roth [31] [32] – that will be the subject when we are using the term "Storytelling" in the following explanations – encourages employees to narrate their attitudes and memories in interview situations. The interviewer creates (together with

the interviewed person) a story about an event or a project that has taken place within the organization so that other persons in the organization can benefit from these narratives. An important aim here is the experience-oriented preparing of documents. The intention of Storytelling is not to identify or to define data and information, but to distribute knowledge by telling complete stories about how an incident occurred. Thereby personal impressions and subjective views on job issues are considered. Moreover (with appropriate software applications), also photos, movies or computerized simulations can become part of an experience-oriented documentation.

From a tacit knowledge view it is positive that the main target of Storytelling is the reflection of circumstances that seem to be diffuse or not really important at first glance. Because those stories often prove to be very valuable for sharing knowledge [33]. The recorded stories provide space for personal impressions and subjective views and therefore they exceed the level of information. The documents don't contain solely facts, but also describe work flows in a narrative way in everyday speech and that's why they give an idea about the experiences of other persons. Storytelling encourages the active imagination of the reader and helps him to put himself in the position of a co-worker. We can say: Narratives enable the spreading of tacit knowledge and that's why they have a huge potential for organizations.

When we look at the ways experts and high-skilled workers seek for (tacit) knowledge and share it we can see that vital knowledge processes are based on communication processes, practical cooperation, personal networks, trust, spatial closeness, a shared cultural background and a good corporate culture [34] [35] [36] [37] [38] [39]. Storytelling is an approach that doesn't focus on these issues primarily. Reading a story is not interactive, responses of the reader cannot influence the story and the reading of a story doesn't enhance the communication (culture) between the employees or within the organization. Documents only can give a contri-

bution to communication and networking indirectly – that is for instance the case when contact details of colleagues with similar interests become part of the documentation.

Tacit knowledge cannot be strictly transferred into words. Tacit knowledge is entangled with deeper levels of personality and this means that the extend of making them explicit is limited [40]. "The legitimate purpose of formalization lies in the reduction of the tacit coefficient to more limited and obvious informal operations; but it is nonsensical to aim at the total elimination of our personal participation" [41]. Thus, documentations are problematic for managing tacit knowledge and documents that follow the ideas of Storytelling will still suffer from the same drawbacks as other stored material. A document is generally written from one particular point of view, which may cause lots of misunderstandings on the part of the user. Comprehending the wording and the content can cause difficulties. A further problem of written documentation is its snap-shot character and the fact that it may be quickly outdated.

## Conclusions

Written documentations or databases are hardly suitable for dealing with tacit knowledge. Storytelling is an approach that starts off at this point and tries to use documents to distribute tacit knowledge in spite of this constraints. Storytelling is not the great breakthrough or a revolution for managing tacit knowledge but it provides an interesting opportunity to modify and to improve (already existing) documentation systems in organizations. It is impossible to regulate the increase, sharing and use of knowledge with a single tool like Storytelling but Storytelling can be a valuable building block of an ambitious knowledge management. For enhancing processes of communication and learning and for creating a knowledge friendly culture within an organization other ideas and tools have to be added and integrated for an accomplished holistic knowledge management.

The management of tacit knowledge is a difficult practice that cannot be mastered mainly technically because knowledge is not a standardised and formalised procedure. But that doesn't mean that technology couldn't be helpful for supporting processes of experience and tacit knowledge. Technology is an indispensable component in the concept of Storytelling. The point here is that we should not act on the assumption that tacit knowledge can be managed technologically and we should not pursue the intention of expropriating the employees' tacit knowledge to store it in a database. Finally technology cannot substitute personal knowledge but it can be supportive.

Storytelling is an art form and stories are blurry but this is not a lack of form or quality because the fuzziness of stories is a precondition for distributing tacit knowledge through narratives. But on the other hand the vagueness constitutes problems. It is open how a story is understood, interpreted and used. Narratives can be misleading or subject to manipulation. Storytelling is located in this ambivalence. It is fruitful and insufficient at the same time – the quality and advantage of Storytelling causes its problems. On the one hand it creates auspicious perspectives and on the other hand it requires involvement in highly difficult and contingent processes.

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