

# What is Tacit Knowledge?

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**"The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice and because we fail to notice that we fail to notice there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."**  
-(R. D. Laing)

We generally think of knowledge as something that is simply memorization of facts, dates, and statistics. However, knowledge encompasses a much broader category: At one extreme knowledge is almost completely explicit: codified, structured, and made accessible to people other than the individuals originating it. An example would be a history book, where the knowledge is organized in a way that anyone can easily get to it. At the other end of the spectrum, knowledge is tacit: semiconscious knowledge held in peoples' heads and bodies. An example would be knowing how to tie ones shoes.

Tacit knowledge is intangible, yet is used constantly by individuals and within teams. It is the primary type of knowledge we use on a daily basis and most likely is caused by our brains acting more as pattern recognition machines than as rule following ones. We

don't follow a list of instructions to accomplish a task, but have a general sense of how to do it, which is more efficient than thinking and remembering. An exercise would be to write a description to someone on how to floss, then watch them try, following only the rules you wrote. These types of activities are typically learned by watching another person over a series of occasions and getting feedback as you try. The apprenticeship system allowed the apprentice time to observe the master's actions in great detail without the master giving formal lessons. While this works well in some situations, modern life and business requires knowledge to be passed on faster and in more detail.

## Using Tacit Knowledge

In today's team-focused businesses, communicating all the details of a project have become even more important, especially as team members often join and leave and members are expected to be effective immediately. While much of the information on a project can be documented, names, plans, reports; other things are hard to organize and write down. The "hundred tiny details" that experienced team members know need to be preserved and communicated to the new member.

While tacit knowledge is difficult to quantify and document in the conventional sense; given the right environment, it easily circulates through an organization. Making tacit knowledge explicit would require writing a rulebook with all the information, instructions, and responses to potential problems needed to do a task. This is very difficult to do, but it is possible to transfer tacit knowledge in a group by encouraging the process tacit knowledge

normally travels.

Tacit knowledge is not stored in papers, but in people and is revealed in the process of a task. It is used to put explicit knowledge into action, and is shared through demonstration and teamwork at all levels of the organization every day. This is why tight, social teams are more efficient than distant people who only telecommunicate or work in cubicles. The difficulty in quantifying tacit knowledge encourages people to share it in the col-

**"We can't exactly define what pornography is, but I know it when I see it."**

-Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart

lective, cooperative modern work environment.

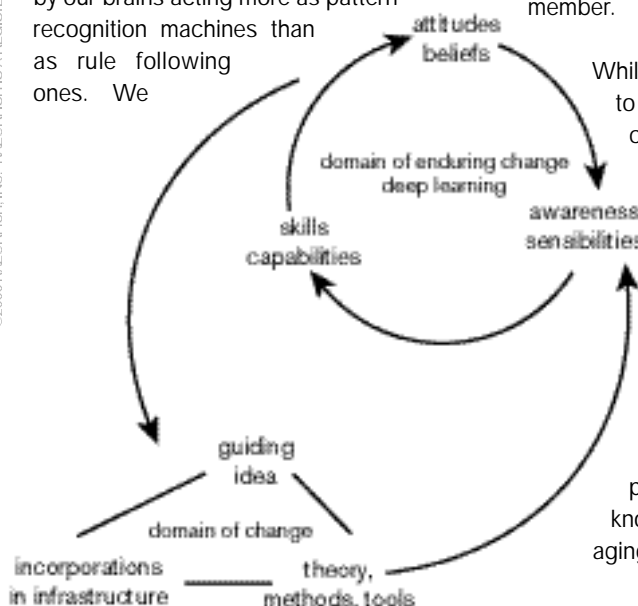
The modes of transfer used in sharing tacit knowledge are Externalization, Socialization, Internalization.

## Externalization

This involves making tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. Very little of the true nature of tacit knowledge survives this transition, in fact, research shows that forcing individuals to describe what they thought they understood about implicitly learned processes often resulted in poorer performance than if the individuals were allowed to utilize their tacit knowledge without explicit explanation. Nevertheless, for tacit knowledge to be of immediate use to large groups of people, it must be externalized.

## Socialization

This is the transference of tacit knowledge from one person to another. This occurs between individuals and within teams through observation, demonstration, and discussion. Socialization involves capturing knowledge through physical proximity



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and creating a common social bond. Open culture and a friendly environment foster this type of conscious or unconscious transfer.

## Internalization

This involves making the explicit into tacit. Through years of study and practice, a person becomes an "expert", and is able to make "intuitive" decisions without having to consult an authority or reference. Internalizing the explicit knowledge happens through the using the knowledge in action or practice. Learning a language involves learning the words, their meanings, and how they are used.

## Encouraging Tacit Knowledge

There are a number of ways of encouraging the transfer of tacit knowledge:

- Encourage a habit of knowledge mapping note taking, illustrating visually not only what decisions were reached, but also how they were reached.

- Implement organization-wide mentoring with a "buddy-system" for new employees.

- Establish structure for moving senior employees across the organization to encourage sharing project, skill, and cul-

tural knowledge.

- Design an work space to facilitate casual discussions and quick team meetings.

- Create a "Best Practices" group to discover what the organization does well and analyze "fires" or "crises" that happen to recognize patterns.

- Develop a "post-mortem" process to identify what went right and wrong on a project

- Use a software communication tool to foster knowledge sharing around explicit documents, especially if the team is physically separated from each other.

- Support informal methods of knowledge sharing. Informal social events bring people together that do not see each other normally, but can often offer help to each other. Interest groups based around a foster conversation and information sharing in ways that would not happen under the day-to-day deadline crunches.

## Benefits

If tacit knowledge is managed more effectively it will benefit the organization by transferring information and experience more effectively across offices, disciplines, projects. In the long term an envi-

ronment of institutionalized innovation will be fostered, with a free flow of ideas occurring across the organization. The benefits of facilitating tacit knowledge are:

- Learn from mistakes, Minimize repetition during iterative processes

- Anticipate and satisfy client needs faster and more effectively

- Create consistency in relationships, projects and deliverables

- Improve management of stakeholder expectations

- Ease the on-boarding of new team members.

In today's world, whether at home or at work, tacit knowledge transfer is increasingly important. By recognizing the different forms of knowledge, we can begin to understand their importance, and create ways to share them.

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### for more information:

*Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge, Hyelre*  
*The Fifth Discipline and The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, Peter Senge*  
*The Knowledge Creating Company, Nonaka*  
*Transitions, William Bridges*  
*The Walking People, Paula Underwood*  
*The Invisible Computer, Donald Norman*  
*Making Common Sense, Center for Creative Leadership*  
*Tacit Knowledge in Organizations, Philippe Baumard*  
*Open Mind, Davna Markora, Ph.D.*  
*Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail, John Kotter (Harvard Business Review)*

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