Chapter IV

Testing for Tacit Knowledge

... organizational knowledge is abstract and possesses “soft” features, which are related to subtle, implicit, embedded and invisible knowledge, presumptions, values, and ways of thinking which permeate behaviour, decisions, and actions. As such, organizational templates are ill-defined, do not have clear boundaries, and they are context-dependent. Outcomes and performance of organizational knowledge are also difficult to specify, understand and measure (Guzman & Wilson, 2005, p.61).

Introduction

It is acknowledged that there exists a need for organisationally-based tacit knowledge research. Perhaps the major hurdle to undertaking any form of tacit knowledge testing however, is attempting to gain data that for all intents and purposes is not strictly speaking codified, even if aspects of it may be articulable (Dampney, Busch, & Richards, 2002). Given the often ethereal nature of tacit knowledge, testing must be based upon sound definitions. The definition arrived at for this study was that of “articulable implicit IT managerial knowledge,” which fits within Fleck’s (1997) designation of “informal knowledge.” What follows in this chapter is a discussion on the current research issues relating to testing for tacit knowledge.
Whilst Fleck (1997) describes tacit knowledge at the whole organisational level as being a form of meta (knowledge about knowledge) or cultural knowledge, the purpose of the book is to examine tacit knowledge in individuals and more particularly the likely diffusion of such knowledge through the (IT) organisation. To that end, an individualistic approach is adopted, as well as a case study style, for “in general, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real life context” (Yin, 1994, p. 1). Furthermore, given the exploratory nature of the work being reported here, the case study lends itself well to investigating a current phenomenon within a real life context using a variety of sources of information (Wassenaar & Katsma, 2004). Nonetheless difficulties in performing tacit knowledge testing from a case study point of view have been noted in Baumard’s (1999) seminal work on tacit knowledge in organisations:

The case study method disturbs organizations by its investigative nature, its high cost in terms of hours of interviews, and the difficulty of promising quantifiable results. Spending time within a company encourages it to expose itself to the researcher’s scrutiny, which company directors are not generally favourable to; and executives themselves are reticent about responding to an investigation which is interested in the manner in which they acquire and manage their knowledge during difficult periods (p. 4).

These hurdles aside, the case study is the most suitable approach for studying the phenomenon of tacit knowledge given the research takes place within a real life context and the investigator has little control over organisational events.

Again, the topic covered here is exploratory in nature. One interpretation of exploratory research is that it is not regarded as a complete study on its own, rather acting as a prelude to further research (Yin, 1994). Gregor (2002) had identified five different theory types depending on the type of research problem that needed to be solved. These were type 1: for Analysing and Describing; 2. for Understanding; 3. for Predicting; 4. for Explaining and Predicting; 5. for Design and Action. This exploratory research makes use of the first two types of theory, namely analysing/descibing and understanding. The first theory is utilised as part of the explication process leading to the definitions of tacit knowledge covered in the previous chapter. The second theory on the other hand explains how and why something takes place. The second theory thus covers the use of case studies and surveys/questionnaires as a means of eliciting the empirical component to the research.

The Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives

Given the information systems nature of the research in this empirical study, it is considered advisable to explain the ontological and epistemological perspectives adopted. The ontological perspective adopted is that the theories utilised, possess a separate existence from...