Chapter 9

Connecting and Sharing Tacit Knowledge:
Do Social Media Help or Hinder?

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration has become a part of our everyday life – including our everyday work life. In addition, our work colleagues are often not in close physical proximity, making face-to-face interactions rare. As a result, we have come to rely on information and communication technologies to connect – in particular, social networking technologies or social media. While traditional technologies are well suited for sharing explicit knowledge that has been articulated and documented as text or other media, tacit knowledge is more challenging. Tacit knowledge is typically experiential knowledge that is very difficult to put into words or document in any way. This chapter investigates the benefits and barriers to using social media with respect to professional communication and collaboration. Recommendations are proposed to help select the best knowledge sharing medium for tacit knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The two major types of knowledge is defined by the Business Dictionary (http://www.businessdiction-ary.com/definition/explicit-knowledge.html) as:

Explicit knowledge: Articulated knowledge, expressed and recorded as words, numbers, codes, mathematical and scientific formulae, and musical notations. Explicit knowledge is easy to communicate, store, and distribute and is the knowledge found in books, on the web, and other visual and oral means. Opposite of tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge: Unwritten, unspoken, and hidden vast storehouse of knowledge held by practically every human being, based on his or her emotions, experiences, insights, intuition, observations and internal-

ized information. Tacit knowledge is integral to the entirety of a person's consciousness, is acquired largely through association with other people, and requires joint or shared activities to be imparted from on to another. Like the submerged part of an iceberg it constitutes the bulk of what one knows, and forms the underlying framework that makes explicit knowledge possible. Concept of tacit knowledge was introduced by the Hungarian philosopher-chemist Michael Polanyi (1891-1976) in his 1966 book 'The Tacit Dimension.' Also called informal knowledge.

Explicit knowledge has been documented in some way, usually as text but it can also be an audio or video recording. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, exists only in the minds of people. It is very difficult to articulate (verbalize, explain) let alone document. The challenge stems from the fact that tacit knowledge usually results from years of experience, involves judgment, can be very subjective and prescriptive and is usually quite complex (Nonaka, 2008). Social media are therefore expected to be better suited to the sharing of tacit knowledge as they are based on social networks (relationships) that connect people to people. As people interact with one another, they are more likely to have the time and motivation to contextualize their tacit knowledge to share with others. Similarly, they will be more open to doing so if they are reciprocating or returning a favor to others who have helped them in the past.

Knowledge sharing refers to "the ability of employees to share their work-related experience, expertise, know-how, and contextual information with other employees through informal and formal interactions within or across teams or work units. This knowledge-sharing capability "…also refers to employees' ability to acquire knowledge that is held by other divisions with the organization" (Kim and Lee, 2006, p. 371).

Van Den Hooff and De Ridder"s (2004) conceptualize knowledge sharing as a "process where individuals mutually exchange their implicit (tacit) and explicit knowledge to create new knowledge" (p.119). Taylor (2017) studied knowledge sharing between entrepreneurs and their senior managers and noted that over the past 20 years, entrepreneurs have had an increasingly participative role in decision making, their autonomy increased and norms were established. In addition, ""senior managers who interacted more frequently with the entrepreneur learned increasingly to think like the entrepreneur…" (p. 119). Increased interaction led to more tacit knowledge sharing and the senior manager learned how the entrepreneur works and thinks. For example, initial perceptions that the entrepreneur made decisions too quickly without having sufficient facts was eliminated.

Tacit knowledge is very challenging to access and communicate to others as it requires extensive interaction in order to ensure that knowledge is effectively transferred, received and understood. This chapter explores the effectiveness of using traditional and emerging social media to foster the sharing of tacit knowledge in organizations.

TYPES OF TECHNOLOGIES USED FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING

A variety of technologies can and have been used in organizational knowledge sharing. Any form of interaction that does not occur face-to-face in real time in the same physical space will necessarily have some type of technology mediating the connection between two or more people. Historically, this took place as a form of computer-mediated communication: "communication that takes place between human

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