



Integrating knowledge and knowing: A framework for understanding knowledge-in-practice[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The foundation of an organization's strategy often lies in its ability to generate, combine, recombine, and exploit knowledge. Two very different perspectives have emerged in knowledge management research: a commodity view which sees knowledge as something to be acquired, stored, and converted and a community perspective which emphasizes knowing and the ability to act on what one knows. We propose a new framework for understanding knowledge in organizations which integrates these two views and complements prior research by focusing on knowledge-in-practice. In doing so, we clarify the organizational knowledge construct by examining the underlying knowledge-based characteristics of work practices. We create a multidimensional understanding of the knowledge-in-practice construct and introduce the concept of learnability. We explain how the proposed framework can lead to future research and discuss managerial implications for achieving fit between knowledge-in-practice and organization policies.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been tremendous growth in research on organizational knowledge, the knowledge-based view, and knowledge creating organizations (Grant, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Orlikowski, 2002; Tsoukas, 1996). During this time, the knowledge-based view of the firm has rapidly seized a dominant position in management research as a theory explaining firm performance (Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002). The underlying principle of the knowledge-based view is that the foundation of an organization's performance lies in its ability to generate, combine, recombine, and exploit knowledge (Kogut & Zander, 1996). Thus knowledge is often viewed as the most strategically significant resource of the firm (Dierickx & Cool, 1989; Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992) and an important focus for strategic human resource management is the ability to induce learning and leverage know-how, information, and talent.

At the foundation of knowledge management theories, however, are two fundamental questions identified by Grant (1996: 110) (1) what is knowledge? And (2) what are the characteristics of knowledge which have critical implications for management? Answers to these two questions remain elusive and controversial. As the knowledge-based view of the firm suggests, knowledge is a strategically significant resource of the firm and the major determinant of sustained competitive advantage (Grant, 1996). Yet, "the concept of organizational knowledge is fuzzy and has been defined in a number of ways" (Smith, Collins, & Clark, 2005: 347). For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) view knowledge as justified true beliefs. Grant (1996) defines knowledge as "that which is known" with the understanding that there are many types of knowledge relevant to a firm.

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Davenport and Prusak (1998: 05) define knowledge as “a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information.”

The inconsistency and vagueness surrounding organizational knowledge can be tied to the development of two distinct schools of thought. Researchers in the first school, the “commodity” school, have focused on understanding “knowledge” as *an artifact* and conceptualizing what the different types of knowledge in an organization are and how these various types of knowledge impact other organizational phenomena such as innovation, alliance formation, and performance (e.g., Becerra, Lunnan & Huemer, 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In contrast, researchers in the second school, the “community” school, have focused on “knowing” and view knowledge more as a dynamic phenomenon that manifests in the very act of knowing something and using that knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Cook & Brown, 1999; Orlikowski, 2002; Pfeffer & Sutton, 1999; Tsoukas, 2003). Although potentially relevant to one another, the two schools of thought have evolved independently with little theoretical integration. Among knowledge theorists, however, a debate continues about what the important and meaningful characteristics of knowledge are and how they should be studied (Newell, Roberts, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002). This debate concerns not only identifying the important characteristics of knowledge, but also understanding which characteristics have critical implications for organizations.

The purpose of this article is to clarify the knowledge construct that has been defined in numerous ways across many disciplines. While knowledge is not a new construct in the human resource management literature, it is a construct that has been built upon without much examination. For example, from a selection perspective, knowledge—along with skill, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs)—forms a basis for making hiring decisions. However, dimensions of knowledge (e.g., codifiability, tacitness) are rarely considered. A training perspective offers another example. Knowledge acquisition and transfer of training are addressed typically from a job/task analysis focus, yet organizational practices often transcend both tasks and jobs. By critically examining the construct of knowledge, as we do in this paper, we provide HR researchers with new ways of looking at an old construct as well as provide new avenues for research, particularly in strategic human resource management.

We assert that a crucial research question concerns identifying the characteristics of knowledge that have important implications for management and human resource management activities. To do this, we propose a focus on bridging the gap or integrating what sociologists or the community school calls “knowing” and what western epistemology or the commodity school refers to as knowledge (Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002). We focus on working knowledge because this perspective acknowledges that knowing (the dominant feature of the community school) has important tacit elements (reflecting the commodity school) that are embedded in action, or as Schon (1983: 49) explains “knowing is in our action.”

We build on the contributions of prior work and integrate the two positions on organizational knowledge to address both what has to be known and how knowing takes place. We propose a framework that complements each of the prior perspectives to focus on the knowledge involved in doing organizational work which we call knowledge-in-practice. Practice implies doing and refers to coordinated activities of organizational members informed by meanings in their specific context. In other words, practice refers to the way in which work gets done and knowing how to do it (Brown & Duguid, 2001: 200). Context is an essential ingredient to consider because organizational practices will differ across different domains and settings.

An integrated framework of knowledge-in-practice makes several contributions to management theory in general and to the expanding domain of knowledge management. First, by integrating the two perspectives on knowledge management we clarify some of the misunderstandings associated with efforts to distinguish between knowledge and knowing. To do this, we introduce the notion of knowledge-in-practice learnability and suggest it is a missing component in management and knowledge management research. Combined with tacitness, learnability allows for the breakdown of various forms of knowledge-in-practice (hereafter, KIP). Second, with a refocused dimensional understanding of the knowledge construct based on Polanyi's (1966) original work, we hope to redirect the focus to the learnability and tacitness of knowledge involved in organizational practices, and we aim to bridge the two theoretical schools of thought (i.e., knowledge as a resource and the process of knowing) to create a more accurate picture of knowledge-in-practice. We explain why this is an important step toward clarifying the knowledge construct. Third, we articulate the implications of this refocused dimensional understanding for knowledge management and management research in general as well as specific implications for human resource management processes.

2. Conceptual background

Many contradictions in the current literature stem from two alternative perspectives on organizational knowledge (see Table 1). The first, which Tsoukas (1996: 203) distinguishes as a “possession” or commodity approach, proposes that organizations have different types of knowledge and that identifying, categorizing, and examining these types of knowledge will lead to more effective means of codifying information, and developing strategies to convert tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge or to make individual knowledge more widely known (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). Other researchers, often critical of the commodity approach, use the foundations of Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice learning theory to suggest that practices or actions should be the critical point of analysis and that to understand knowledge requires examining the context in which it is used (Brown & Duguid, 2001; Tsoukas, 1996).

2.1. The commodity or possession perspective

Researchers advocating the commodity or possession perspective use Polanyi's works as a reference point and emphasize two distinct kinds of knowledge: tacit and explicit. This distinction has led to additional taxonomies such as local vs. universal, codified vs. non-codified, procedural vs. declarative, and know-how vs. know-what (Orlikowski, 2002). In an attempt to direct both

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