

How the Healthcare Industry Leverages Tacit Knowledge

In an era where information is the new currency, knowledge management has become a critical aspect of every industry. The healthcare sector, with its complex and dynamic nature, is no exception. One of the most valuable yet often overlooked types of knowledge is tacit knowledge - the unspoken, unwritten, and hidden vast storehouse of knowledge, which is used daily. This article explores how the healthcare industry leverages tacit knowledge, the best practices in capturing and leveraging it, and insights that other industries can glean from healthcare's approach.



Role of Tacit Knowledge in Healthcare

Tacit knowledge, often contrasted with explicit knowledge, refers to the kind of knowledge that is difficult to transfer to another person by means of writing it down or verbalizing it. In healthcare, tacit knowledge is the bedrock of clinical decision-making and patient care. It includes the intuitive understanding that physicians develop about their patients, the instinctive skills of nurses, and the experiential knowledge of administrators. “In the healthcare industry, tacit knowledge could be in the impulse of a doctor to spot that a patient is deteriorating beyond the level indicated by the vital signs alone whereas explicit knowledge helps in identifying the right medications to treat a problem.”¹

For example, a seasoned doctor might make a diagnosis not just based on the symptoms presented but also on subtle cues picked up during patient interaction. Similarly, a nurse might adjust care based on personal understanding of a patient's comfort and responses. These are examples of tacit knowledge at play, driving critical decisions and actions in healthcare.

Best Practices in Capturing and Leveraging Tacit Knowledge in Healthcare



Capturing and leveraging tacit knowledge in healthcare can be challenging due to its intangible nature. However, several best practices have emerged:

Mentorship Programs: These programs allow experienced healthcare professionals to pass on their tacit knowledge to novices through guidance and shared experiences.

Communities of Practice: These are groups where healthcare professionals can share and discuss their experiences and insights, facilitating the transfer of tacit knowledge.

Narrative Methods: Storytelling or case study discussions can be effective ways to share tacit knowledge. They provide context, which is often crucial for understanding and applying tacit knowledge.

Simulation Training: This allows healthcare professionals to apply their tacit knowledge in a controlled training environment and receive feedback, which can then be incorporated into their practice.

Case Studies of Successful Tacit Knowledge Management in Healthcare

Several healthcare organizations have successfully managed tacit knowledge to improve their services. For instance, a study conducted in a Malaysian public teaching hospital highlighted the importance of tacit knowledge sharing among nurses in a hospital setting and how it can influence innovative behavior, which is crucial for improving patient care and outcomes.² The nurses in the study often shared their tacit knowledge through storytelling. They narrated their experiences, which helped in passing on knowledge to their peers. Experienced nurses took on the role of mentors to guide and support novice nurses, facilitating the transfer of tacit knowledge. By observing experienced nurses in action, novice nurses could pick up on non-verbal cues and techniques that weren't explicitly taught. Discussions and reflections after critical incidents or challenging cases were also instrumental. These discussions allowed nurses to share their insights and learn from each other's experiences.

Another example is a case study that explored the role of tacit knowledge in shaping public health initiatives in Ontario, Canada.³ Public health planning is a blend of science and art, carried out in a complex and often time-constrained environment. This study employed one-on-one interviews and focus groups to investigate how tacit knowledge, which is not found in formal research literature, informs program planning in public health. The study used a narrative inquiry approach, emphasizing storytelling to comprehend the world. Four diverse public health units were purposefully selected for the study. The analysis highlighted various ways in which tacit knowledge influenced program planning by identifying opportunities, forming teams, and addressing program details like partnerships and funding. Overall, the study underscores the pervasive role of tacit knowledge at different stages of public health program planning. These findings offer insights that can guide the development of effective knowledge translation strategies for public health organizations and decision-makers.

Insights on What Other Industries Can Learn from Healthcare's Approach

The healthcare industry's approach to managing tacit knowledge offers valuable insight for other sectors. Healthcare and medical institutions are exemplars in demonstrating how to share tacit knowledge with newer members to the field. Medical specialists and surgeons in particular, receive some of the most extensive training of any field, which includes medical school, internship, residency, fellowships, and then board certification. After all that, they continue to learn from their unique experiences gaining tacit knowledge over the span of their careers.



The emphasis on mentorship and communities of practice can be applied in any industry that relies on experiential knowledge. The use of narrative methods highlights the importance of context in knowledge sharing, a principle that can enhance communication in any field. Lastly,

the use of simulation training underscores the value of experiential learning, which can be particularly beneficial in industries such as aviation, manufacturing, and IT.

TRADOC can benefit from applying these practices throughout the organization to capture tacit knowledge. Emphasis can be put on mentorship programs and communities of practice. Additionally, storytelling and narratives can be leveraged at key venues and forums to facilitate the transfer of tacit knowledge.

Conclusion

Tacit knowledge, with its inherent complexity, plays a crucial role in any organization. By implementing strategies to capture and leverage this form of knowledge, organizations can enhance their service delivery. Furthermore, the approaches used by the healthcare industry provide valuable lessons for TRADOC organizations in managing their own reservoirs of tacit knowledge. As we move forward, the ability to harness tacit knowledge will continue to be a key differentiator across all industries.

This TRADOC OCKO publication was written by Nathan Truckenbrod in September 2023. Want to learn more? You can respond to this article or access related articles, blogs, media presentations, and more at <https://www.milsuite.mil/book/groups/tradoc-km>.

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Notes:

1. TacitKey, “Differentiating Explicit and Tacit Knowledge in Healthcare,” August 18, 2017, <https://www.tacitkey.com/blog/differentiating-explicit-and-tacit-knowledge-healthcare/>.
2. Constance, Nur Wah, et.al., “Supervisory Justice, Organizational Citizenship Behavior, and Innovation Behavior: The Mediating Role of Tacit Knowledge Sharing among Nurses,” International Journal of Academic Research in Economics & Management Sciences, December 27, 2019.
3. Kothari, Anita, et.al., “The Use of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge in Public Health: A Qualitative Study,” Implementation Science, March 20, 2012. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3325865/pdf/1748-5908-7-20.pdf>

Further Reading:

- [Communities of Practice - CDC](#)
- [Simulation Training in Healthcare](#)



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Contact the TRADOC OCKO for support, development, and training: dashboards, collaboration sites, SharePoint, metrics, Key Performance Indicators (KPI), process mapping, Microsoft Teams, multimedia production, and more.