

## Unlocking the Potential of Tacit Knowledge

In a world driven by information and explicit know-how, the intrinsic power of tacit knowledge often remains hidden in plain sight. Beyond textbooks and formal training lies an invaluable realm of unspoken insights, intuitions, and experiential wisdom that individuals possess. The potential of tacit knowledge, with its ability to bridge gaps, solve complex problems, and foster innovation, is increasingly gaining recognition as a formidable force shaping our understanding and approach to various domains. In this article, we will explore the often-underestimated realm of tacit knowledge and the ways in which organizations and individuals can harness its transformative capabilities to unlock new dimensions of success and understanding.

### What is tacit knowledge

Tacit knowledge refers to the intricate web of unspoken, intuitive, and experiential insights that individuals accumulate over time. Unlike explicit knowledge that can be easily codified and transferred through formal means, tacit knowledge is deeply personal and often challenging to articulate or document. It encompasses skills, intuitions, perceptions, and cultural understandings that individuals gather through their interactions, experiences, and observations. This unspoken wisdom plays a vital role in decision-making, problem-solving, and navigating complex situations, often serving as the underlying foundation for expertise in various fields. Recognizing and harnessing the potential of tacit knowledge can lead to enhanced learning, innovation, and a more holistic understanding of problems or challenges within an organization.



Tacit knowledge is defined in the Army Technical Publication 6-01.1, Techniques for Effective Knowledge Management as, “What individuals know; a unique, personal store of knowledge gained from life experiences, training, and networks of friends, acquaintances, and professional colleagues.”<sup>1</sup>

### Why is tacit knowledge important

In the realm of knowledge management, tacit knowledge occupies a crucial and often underestimated role. While explicit knowledge can be systematically documented and shared, it is the tacit dimension that adds depth and nuance to the overall knowledge landscape. Tacit knowledge, being deeply rooted in personal experiences and intuitions, offers a unique perspective that cannot be easily codified.

Incorporating tacit knowledge into knowledge management strategies enhances the comprehensiveness of information repositories and promotes a more holistic understanding of a given subject. By recognizing the value of tacit knowledge, organizations can create environments that facilitate knowledge sharing through mentorship, collaborative practices, and

informal interactions, ultimately fostering innovation, better decision-making, and a more resilient knowledge ecosystem.

### **Challenges in managing tacit knowledge**

Managing tacit knowledge presents a set of intricate challenges that stem from its inherent nature. Below are listed three challenges in working with tacit knowledge.

- 1) Intangible Nature and Articulation Difficulty: Tacit knowledge resides within an individual's mind as a complex web of experiences, intuitions, and insights. Unlike explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge often defies easy articulation. This intangibility poses a significant challenge when attempting to capture and convey such knowledge to others. As a result, organizations face difficulty in translating these nuanced insights into forms that can be shared, archived, and integrated into organizational knowledge systems.
- 2) Subjectivity and Translatability: Tacit knowledge is highly personal and subjective, often shaped by an individual's unique experiences and perceptions. This inherent subjectivity makes it challenging to standardize or generalize tacit knowledge across different audiences or situations. When an individual tries to communicate their tacit knowledge to others, there's a risk of misinterpretation or loss of the depth and context that make the knowledge valuable. Bridging the gap between an individual's personal experiences and a collective understanding of others becomes an obstacle.
- 3) Individualistic Acquisition and Transfer Hurdles: Tacit knowledge is often acquired through years of experience, hands-on learning, and immersion in specific contexts. This individualistic process of accumulation means that not all team members or organizational members possess the same tacit insights. This uniqueness can create barriers to knowledge transfer, especially in collaborative settings where the relevance and value of tacit knowledge may not be immediately apparent to others. Attempting to share such knowledge might require not only effective communication but also an understanding of how different individuals learn and interpret these insights.

### **Methods for capturing and transferring tacit knowledge**

Capturing and transferring tacit knowledge demands innovative approaches that bridge the gap between the deeply personal nature of one's knowledge and its integration into organizational practices. One method involves the cultivation of mentorship and apprenticeship programs, where seasoned experts pass on their tacit insights through direct interaction and shared experiences with less experienced individuals.

Storytelling serves as a powerful tool to convey tacit knowledge by contextualizing it within real world scenarios and relatable narratives. These stories can be told on collaborative platforms, such as online forums and knowledge sharing networks. These platforms facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge across geographically dispersed teams.

Additionally, immersive simulations and experiential learning exercises enable participants to engage with scenarios that mirror real world situations, thereby capturing tacit knowledge through hands-on engagement. This technology plays a pivotal role through multimedia tools,

including videos, podcasts, and virtual reality experiences, providing avenues to capture tacit knowledge in diverse formats that resonate with different learning styles. By leveraging these multifaceted methods, organizations can not only capture and retain tacit knowledge but also foster an environment where its transfer becomes an integral part of their knowledge management strategy.

Several organizations have harnessed the potential of tacit knowledge management with remarkable success, reaping benefits across diverse sectors. One notable example is found in the field of software development, where Agile methodologies have been embraced. Agile teams rely heavily on tacit knowledge, promoting daily interactions and open communication to share insights informally. This practice accelerates problem solving, innovation, and adaptability, enhancing project outcomes. In the healthcare sector, medical practitioners routinely engage in grand rounds and case discussions, creating spaces to exchange tacit insights gained from years of clinical experience. These exchanges foster cross-specialty learning and enhance patient care through a holistic approach. These diverse examples underscore the significance of tacit knowledge in increasing shared understanding within a workforce, enhancing organizational performance, and pushing the boundaries of creativity within organizations.

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This TRADOC OCKO publication was written by Dion Hopkins in August 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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**Image:** <https://www.freepik.com/premium-ai-image/conceptual-image-two-human-heads>

### **Notes**

1. US Army, (2015). Techniques for Effective Knowledge Management (ATP 6-01.1, supersedes FM 6-01.1 dated 16 July 2012). Page 1-3, para. 1-6. Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate



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