

TACIT KNOWLEDGE

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Tacit Knowledge

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1. Core Definition

Tacit knowledge refers to the highly personal, context-specific knowledge that is difficult to formalize, articulate, or communicate verbally. It is often described as internalized knowledge that an individual possesses but cannot easily describe or write down. The philosopher Michael Polanyi, who popularized the term, famously asserted that "We can know more than we can tell," capturing the essence of this complex concept. This type of knowledge is typically acquired through long-term experience, observation, practice, and immersion within a particular context or culture. It resides deep within the individual, manifesting as intuition, skills, judgment, and expertise, rather than as documented facts or procedures.

Unlike codified information found in manuals or databases, **tacit knowledge** is intimately tied to the action and the knower. For instance, a master craftsman knows exactly how much pressure to apply to a chisel based on the grain of the wood--knowledge gained not from reading a book, but from years of physical interaction with the material. This knowledge is subjective and empirical, forming the foundational wisdom that allows experts to perform tasks automatically and efficiently without needing to consciously analyze every step. Its inherent resistance to codification makes it both highly valuable and notoriously difficult to transfer or manage within large organizations.

In psychological and sociological contexts, tacit knowledge encompasses the unwritten rules and social competencies necessary to navigate interpersonal relationships and cultural environments effectively. The knowledge that determines how one should appropriately react to a particular emotional situation, or the unspoken timing required during a collaborative task, falls squarely within this category. This form of knowledge is not acquired through formal instruction or schooling; rather, it is absorbed informally, often unconsciously, during daily interactions and through processes of social learning, forming the bedrock of functional societal participation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of tacit knowledge gained widespread recognition primarily through the work of Hungarian-British philosopher and scientist Michael Polanyi in the mid-20th century, particularly in his 1966 work, *The Tacit Dimension*. Polanyi argued against the reductionist view of knowledge that privileged explicit, scientific articulation. He posited that all human knowledge rests ultimately on a foundation of tacit understanding, suggesting that even the ability to comprehend and utilize explicit knowledge requires an underlying tacit framework of interpretation and skill. His initial explorations into this phenomenon stemmed from his observations about scientific discovery and

the implicit judgments scientists make during experimentation.

Following Polanyi's philosophical groundwork, the concept was substantially developed and applied to the field of management and organizational studies in the 1990s by Japanese theorists Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi. Their seminal work, *The Knowledge-Creating Company* (1995), positioned tacit knowledge as the critical ingredient for innovation and organizational competitive advantage. Nonaka and Takeuchi devised the SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) to explain how knowledge is converted between tacit and explicit forms within a company, thereby driving the creation of new organizational knowledge.

The distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge provided a crucial theoretical lens for understanding why organizations often fail to learn or transfer best practices merely by circulating manuals or databases. The historical development of the concept shifted the focus from knowledge as a static, measurable commodity to knowledge as a dynamic process inherently linked to human activity and communal practice. This shift underscored the importance of factors like organizational culture, mentorship, and physical proximity in facilitating the sharing and generation of valuable, experience-based knowledge across different departments and teams.

3. Key Characteristics: Explicit vs. Tacit

To fully appreciate the nature of tacit knowledge, it is essential to contrast it with its counterpart, explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be readily articulated, codified, stored, and retrieved. This includes written procedures, documented data, formulas, instructions, and reports. It is objective, easily transferable, and rational, often forming the basis of formal educational curricula and organizational databases. The accessibility and structure of explicit knowledge make it simple to manage through information technology systems, but it often lacks the context necessary for practical application.

Conversely, tacit knowledge is characterized by its inherent difficulty in documentation and articulation. It is experiential, highly context-dependent, and embedded in the practical skills and perceptual abilities of the individual. Key characteristics of tacit knowledge include its subjective nature--what an individual knows tacitly is often unique to their personal history and context--and its automaticity. Tacit skills, such as riding a bicycle or performing a complex surgical procedure, are executed without conscious effort, relying on deeply ingrained mental and physical models that are challenging to dissect into discrete, verbalizable steps.

This critical distinction generates challenges in knowledge management. While explicit knowledge can be replicated endlessly at low cost, tacit knowledge requires time-intensive processes like apprenticeship, coaching, and direct social interaction for its successful transfer. The two forms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive, however; rather, they exist in a symbiotic relationship. Explicit knowledge provides the theoretical framework, while tacit knowledge provides the

contextual understanding and practical skill necessary to apply that framework effectively. An engineer knows the explicit formula for structural integrity, but the tacit knowledge allows them to intuitively gauge material stress on the construction site.

Subjectivity: Tied to personal experience, intuition, and specific context.

Automaticity: Often manifests as automatic skills and unconscious routines.

Difficulty of Articulation: Cannot be easily written down, taught, or verbalized.

Transfer Mechanism: Requires non-verbal methods such as observation, imitation, and shared experience (socialization).

4. Role in Socialization and Learning

Tacit knowledge plays a foundational and indispensable role in human socialization and the acquisition of informal learning. Much of what is necessary for functional membership in a society--including cultural norms, moral judgment, emotional regulation, and linguistic nuance--is acquired through immersion and informal experience rather than formal education. As indicated in the foundational definition, **social rules are learnt automatically** when individuals begin moving in society; this acquisition process is a prime example of the development of tacit social knowledge.

Children, for instance, learn the complex rules of social interaction--when to interrupt, how to interpret facial expressions, and the appropriate emotional response to various stimuli--not by being taught a set of explicit instructions, but by observing, mimicking, and internalizing the behaviors of their parents, peers, and cultural models. This knowledge, gained primarily at home and within immediate social circles, forms a crucial, unspoken guide to behavior. Similarly, language acquisition involves a vast amount of tacit knowledge concerning phonetics, pragmatics, and semantic context that far exceeds the explicit rules of grammar typically taught in schools.

The transfer of these essential social competencies relies heavily on socialization, the first phase of Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model. This process involves the sharing of experience and mental models through direct interaction. When an individual learns how to handle a delicate professional negotiation or how to console a grieving friend, they are internalizing complex tacit patterns of communication and empathy. The effectiveness of this learning is not measured by a test score but by the individual's seamless and appropriate execution of the behavior in real-world, often emotionally charged, situations.

5. Significance in Organizational Theory and Management

In the realm of organizational theory, **tacit knowledge** is recognized as a vital strategic asset and a critical source of competitive advantage. Since it cannot be easily copied or bought, the collective tacit expertise held by employees represents a unique, sustainable resource for innovation and problem-solving. Companies that successfully leverage their employees' deeply embedded skills

often demonstrate superior performance and adaptability, particularly in complex, rapidly changing environments where formalized procedures quickly become obsolete.

Managing tacit knowledge presents unique challenges for human resources and leadership. Traditional management tools designed to capture and distribute explicit information are ineffective for handling knowledge that exists only in the minds and hands of experts. Therefore, organizations must intentionally create environments that facilitate the conversion and sharing of tacit knowledge. Effective mechanisms often include establishing communities of practice, implementing robust mentorship and apprenticeship programs, and fostering a strong organizational culture that encourages dialogue, experimentation, and storytelling to convey practical wisdom.

The failure to recognize and manage tacit knowledge can lead to significant organizational vulnerability, particularly through knowledge flight. When a long-tenured expert retires or leaves the company, they take with them years of accumulated, non-codified wisdom--the specific, intuitive know-how required to handle niche problems or complex systems. Effective knowledge management strategies are thus focused not just on documenting procedures (explicit knowledge), but on building robust social capital and interactive processes that allow junior staff to internalize the tacit judgments and skills of senior personnel before they depart.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its widespread acceptance in management and epistemology, the concept of tacit knowledge remains subject to several philosophical and practical debates. One major criticism centers on the true distinctiveness of tacit knowledge. Some critics argue that the notion of "tacit" knowledge is merely knowledge that has not yet been articulated, suggesting that with sufficient effort and time, any form of knowledge can theoretically be rendered explicit. This view minimizes the inherent resistance to codification emphasized by Polanyi, proposing a continuum rather than a fundamental duality between the two knowledge types.

A second significant challenge lies in the difficulty of measurement and assessment. Since **tacit knowledge** resists formal articulation, standard psychometric tests and traditional performance metrics often fail to accurately capture an individual's true depth of experience or intuitive capability. This lack of objective measurement complicates hiring, training, and performance evaluation processes, forcing reliance on subjective judgments and observational assessments of competence, which can introduce bias.

Furthermore, debates exist regarding the mechanisms of transfer. While socialization is widely accepted as the primary method, the actual psychological processes by which an individual internalizes complex skills merely by observation or interaction are not fully understood. Critics question whether organizational interventions truly manage the knowledge itself or merely create

environments conducive to the accidental co-creation of new knowledge, highlighting the limitations of managerial control over this fundamentally personal form of knowing.

7. Further Reading

Polanyi, Michael. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. The University of Chicago Press.

Nonaka, Ikujiro, & Takeuchi, Hirotaka. (1995). *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation*. Oxford University Press.

[Wikipedia: Tacit Knowledge](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Epistemology \(Contextual relevance to tacit knowing\)](#)

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