Capturing and Converting Tacit Knowledge for Effective Knowledge Management

343   Ajay Chadha   October 28, 2023   Knowledge Management   18138   0

Knowledge is a critical asset for any organization. It is the foundation upon which businesses are built and sustained. In today's highly competitive business environment, organizations need to leverage their knowledge assets to stay ahead of the competition. While explicit knowledge - the type of knowledge that can be written down, codified, and stored in a database - is critical for success, it's only one part of the equation. Tacit knowledge - the knowledge that is deeply rooted in an individual's experience, beliefs, and values - is equally important but often overlooked.

Tacit Knowledge

In this article, we'll define tacit knowledge, provide examples, and explain why it's essential for organizational success. We'll also provide tips on how to capture tacit knowledge and convert it into explicit knowledge for storing inside a company knowledge base.

What is Tacit Knowledge?

Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge and skills that are difficult to articulate or codify, typically gained through personal experience, intuition, and practice. It is deeply rooted in an individual's cognitive and emotional skills and is often not shared or documented in formal ways. Unlike explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge is subjective, context-dependent, and personal. Tacit knowledge is often challenging to capture, store, and share. It's not always easy to articulate, but it's essential for performing complex tasks, making critical decisions, and solving problems in uncertain or ambiguous situations.

Examples of Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge can take many forms, including skills, expertise, know-how, and intuition. Here are some examples of tacit knowledge:

1. **Skills:** Skills are tacit knowledge because they're deeply ingrained in an individual's muscle memory, experience, and

intuition. For example, a skilled mechanic may be able to diagnose a car problem just by listening to the sound of the engine or feeling the vibrations.

2. **Expertise:** Expertise is a form of tacit knowledge that is developed through years of experience and practice. It is often difficult to articulate and is acquired through trial and error, observation, and hands-on learning. Expertise is highly valued in many industries, such as medicine, law, and engineering.

3. **Intuition:** Intuition is a form of tacit knowledge that is difficult to describe but is often crucial in decision-making. It is often described as a gut feeling or sixth sense and is based on experience and observation. Intuition can be particularly useful in situations where there is a lack of clear data or information. For example, a seasoned salesperson may be able to sense when a customer is about to make a buying decision based on their tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions.

4. **Know-how:** Know-how is a form of tacit knowledge that is developed through practical experience and is often used in technical or manual roles. It involves knowing how to do something, such as fixing a machine, without being able to explain the process in detail.

5. **Social Skills:** Social skills, such as effective communication, leadership, and conflict resolution, are forms of tacit knowledge that are developed through experience and observation. They are essential for building strong relationships and working effectively in teams.

6. **Relationships and Networks:** Relationships and networks are tacit knowledge because they're built on trust, rapport, and personal connections. For example, a successful entrepreneur may have a vast network of contacts that they can tap into for advice, support, and opportunities.

The Importance of Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge is essential for organizations for several reasons:

1. **It is a source of competitive advantage:** Tacit knowledge is often unique to individuals and cannot be easily replicated by competitors. It can be a source of competitive advantage for organizations, particularly in industries where expertise and know-how are highly valued.

2. **It is essential for innovation:** Innovation often requires a combination of explicit and tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge can provide the insights and creativity needed to develop new ideas and solutions.

3. **It is helpful in problem-solving:** Tacit knowledge is essential for solving complex problems that require intuition, judgment, and experience. It enables individuals to make sense of ambiguous or incomplete information, identify patterns and trends, and come up with creative solutions.

4. **It is crucial for effective decision-making:** Tacit knowledge can provide important context and insights that are not available through explicit data or information. It can be particularly useful in situations where there is a lack of clear data or information.

Capturing Tacit Knowledge

Capturing tacit knowledge can be challenging because it's often unstructured, intangible, and subjective. However, there are several techniques that organizations can use to capture tacit knowledge:

1. **Interviews and Mentoring:** One of the most effective ways to capture tacit knowledge is through interviews with experts in the field. Mentoring programs can also be an effective way to transfer tacit knowledge from experienced employees to new hires.

2. **Workshops and Training:** Workshops and training programs can help to capture tacit knowledge by providing employees with the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise. These programs can also help to develop skills and knowledge that are essential for effective performance.

3. **Observation:** Observing employees as they perform their tasks can also provide insight into their tacit knowledge. This can involve watching them work, asking them to explain what they are doing, or shadowing them as they complete their tasks.

4. **Job Shadowing:** Shadowing involves following a subject matter expert or experienced employee as they go about their daily tasks. This can help to identify the tacit knowledge that they use to perform their job, as well as the ways in which they approach and solve problems.

5. **Brainstorming Sessions:** Collaborative brainstorming sessions can also be used to capture tacit knowledge. By bringing together a group of subject matter experts or experienced employees, insights, and knowledge can be shared and documented.

Once the tacit knowledge has been captured, it needs to be converted into explicit knowledge that can be stored in a company knowledge base.

Converting Tacit Knowledge into Explicit Knowledge

There are several techniques that can be used to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge:

1. **Codification:** Codification involves transforming tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be documented and shared. This can involve creating standard operating procedures, checklists, or guidelines that outline the steps involved in a particular task or process.

2. **Storytelling:** Storytelling is an effective way to convey tacit knowledge in a way that is memorable and engaging. By sharing stories and anecdotes about experiences and lessons learned, employees can gain insight into the tacit knowledge that is used to solve problems and make decisions.

3. **Visualization:** Visualization techniques such as diagrams, flowcharts, and process maps can also be used to capture and communicate tacit knowledge. By visually representing complex processes and systems, employees can better understand the underlying principles and concepts.

4. **Expert Systems:** Expert systems are computer programs that mimic the decision-making processes of human experts. By codifying the tacit knowledge of subject matter experts into an expert system, this knowledge can be shared and applied to a wide range of scenarios.

Conclusion

Tacit knowledge is a valuable asset for any organization, as it is knowledge that is often unique and difficult to replicate. Capturing and converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge that can be stored in a company knowledge base is a crucial aspect of knowledge management. By using techniques such as interviews, observation, job shadowing, and workshops, organizations can identify and capture tacit knowledge. And by using techniques such as codification, storytelling, visualization, and expert systems, this tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge that can be easily shared and applied throughout the organization. Ultimately, the ability to effectively capture and manage tacit knowledge can lead to better decision-making, improved processes and procedures, and a more knowledgeable and productive workforce.

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