

THE PHILOSOPHY OF TACIT KNOWLEDGE

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The Tacit Side of Knowledge
Management in Organizations

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80382-678-3 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-677-6 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80382-679-0 (Epub)



ISOQAR certified
Management System,
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ISO 14001



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

When we consider tacit knowledge, i.e. the portion of our knowledge that is difficult to pass on to others in the form of information, e.g. how to cycle, swim, ride, sort fish, grade tea leaves, taste wine and so on, there is no certainty that we must improve our understanding of a phenomenon before we can explain it. Rather, it is the other way around: we must explain a phenomenon more in order to understand it better. This should be understood as the distinction between mastering something and understanding it.

Words are often useful tools for developing, transferring and integrating explicit knowledge. Words are not essential, however, in the case of tacit knowledge. For example, to a large extent we understand what babies are trying to tell us, even before they have learned to use words and understand their meaning. We also understand people who are suffering and turn to us wordlessly. We understand that a person can swim, even if that person cannot explain how he/she does it.

Since tacit knowledge is difficult to codify, and thus difficult to store in external media such as archives, databases and so on, it is completely dependent on individuals. As a result, if the possessors of tacit knowledge disappear from a system, their tacit knowledge can easily disappear with them. Tacit knowledge, which is an aspect of experiential knowledge, has an external influence on social systems, including increased productivity. This was emphasized strongly by Solow (1997, p. 4), including in his reference to Arrow's (1962) article on 'learning by doing'. Accordingly, studies of tacit knowledge relate directly to wealth creation processes in the commercial sector.

It is not always the case that theories develop in the light of observations. Often it can be the other way around. In other words, we develop a theory, and it is only then that we are able to perceive certain phenomena and/or problems that previously were invisible to us. An important objective of this project is precisely to develop elements of such a theory about tacit knowledge, so that we become able to perceive new perspectives.

In this book, we have developed 52 case letters for the purposes of exemplifying, concretizing, elaborating and anchoring the theoretical discussion in

each chapter.¹ Many of the case letters in this book address different sides of a particular aspect of tacit knowledge, and accordingly appear to resemble each other. This has been done quite deliberately, with the intention of allowing the reader to gain a greater understanding of the topic dealt with in the relevant case letters.

REFERENCES

- Arrow, K. J. (1962). The economic implications of learning by doing. *Review of Economic Studies*, 29, 155–173.
- Solow, R. M. (1997). *Learning from learning by doing: Lessons for economic growth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹ Case letter is a term Mintzberg uses for short reports, analyses and discussion of organizations, but which cannot be considered a full-fledged case study.