Chapter 8

Tripartition of Knowledge in Knowledge-Intensive Services

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ABSTRACT

The Service Process Management in Travel Business Networks project focuses on knowledge tripartition. It is carried out at the University of Lapland with the aim of defining knowledge management, network management, and customer relations management from the practical point of view. The implementation of the project entails cooperation with enterprises involved in the travel industry in Lapland. This article examines knowledge-intensive services in the travel industry from the viewpoint of knowledge tripartition. The focus is on implicit knowledge and its special character in the organizational context. Implicit knowledge lies between explicit and tacit knowledge. The conclusion is that implicit knowledge should be taken into account in organizational action. The question is whether this tripartition makes organizational environment clearer or more complex.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of references about knowledge and knowledge management are based on the conception that knowledge is divided into explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Implicit knowledge is often misguidedly identified as tacit knowledge. Implicit knowledge has its own character and therefore needs to be considered from a new standpoint.

In this article we aim to deliberate and open up the traditional division of knowledge, especially the position of implicit knowledge.

Our current research focuses on knowledge-intensive services in the travel industry. We assume that knowledge is the most important resource in organizational action. The classification of knowledge entails three concepts: explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge, and tacit knowledge.

In the present article we emphasize the division of implicit knowledge in two: single pieces of knowledge and knowledge equations.

This research is part of the Service Process Management in Travel Business Networks project. The aim of the project is to form business models, system specifications, and service concepts to be utilized in tourism companies and ICT firms providing services for the tourism industry. In the project data has been collected from the research and development departments of partner companies. The project is based on the application of action research and constructive research. For the purposes of this article the data is analyzed through applied content analysis.

KNOWLEDGE TRIPARTITION

Knowledge has traditionally been divided in two: *explicit knowledge* that has its roots in ancient times and *tacit knowledge* that has a much shorter, but also much more complex history. It is Michael Polanyi who invented the term "tacit knowledge". His words "W*e* can know more than we can tell" revolutionized the whole idea of knowledge (Polanyi, 1983). Since then, at least according to Polanyi's view, tacit knowledge is the deepest and essential ground of all knowledge. It is knowledge that cannot be put into words.

Unlike Polanyi, Nonaka, and Takeuchi (1995) believe that it is possible to transform tacit knowledge into a visible form and to continue forward with it. This is not an easy thing to do, but certainly possible. Nonaka's and Takeuchi's understanding about tacit knowledge differs significantly from Polanyi's thinking. While Polanyi's view of tacit knowledge is based on the idea of "people knowing more than they can tell," Nonaka and Takeuchi rather think that people have plenty of tacit knowledge which may be transferred into a visible form. This transfer is even necessary, since tacit knowledge is difficult to express otherwise (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Wilson takes a strong stand against Nonaka's and Takeuchi's way of treating tacit knowledge. In his view, Nonaka and Takeuchi confuse the concept of knowledge by using incorrect terminology. What Wilson means, and what is also relevant for this article, is that implicit knowledge should be highlighted. According to Wilson, Nonaka and Takeuchi have combined implicit and tacit knowledge into a single entity, which is contrary to Polanyi's idea of tacit knowledge. Implicit knowledge, however, can be expressed – it just isn't recorded anywhere. So, in Wilson's opinion, Nonaka and Takeuchi speak about implicit knowledge when they refer to tacit knowledge (Wilson, 2002).

Wilson's (2002) conception about tacit knowledge is very tight and based on Polanyi's *we know more than we can say* idea. Wilson believes that a knowledge holder can never become fully aware about his or her own tacit knowledge. Such knowledge cannot be spoken, written, or stored in any way. Wilson formulates his point of view as follows:

… "tacit" means "hidden", tacit knowledge is hidden knowledge, hidden even from the consciousness of the knower.

Based on the above, we think that there is a clear reason why knowledge should be divided into three constituents: explicit, implicit, and tacit knowledge. This distribution clarifies the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge and makes it easier to understand what knowledge truly is. If there is implicit knowledge between explicit and tacit knowledge, it is clear that explicit knowledge is stored knowledge, implicit knowledge can be stored, and tacit knowledge is not storable. There is no need to think whether knowledge is hidden or written.

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