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# 4 Relational and Practice-Based Knowledge Management

## Learning objectives

- Understand the difference between the objectivist and the practice-based perspective on knowledge management.
- Define 'knowing' and 'know how'.
- Discuss relational, embedded and embodied knowledge and the role emotions play in practising knowledge management.
- Understand the importance of both formal and informal organisational rituals for effectively practising knowledge management.
- Explore communities-of-practice theory and apply it to event examples.

## Introduction

As mentioned in Chapter 3, knowledge is by many seen as an entity or an object that can be possessed by people but can also exist completely independently of people. This objectivist perspective on knowledge, however, has over the years been critiqued a lot, and a different approach to knowledge management, or even a different understanding of knowledge itself has emerged: knowledge, or as some prefer to say – 'knowing' or 'know-how', is now regarded as a practice and it is therefore inseparable from human beings (Gherardi, 2000; Orlikowski, 2002; Hislop et al., 2018). Hislop et al. (2018) refer to this as the practice-based

perspective on knowledge, whereby engaging in practices means that people do not just engage in cognitive processes, but in more holistic processes involving the whole body. It is based on the assumption that knowledge is not an object, but rather it is multi-faceted and complex, explicit and tacit at the same time, individual and distributed, situated and abstract, mental and physical, static and constantly developing and evolving (Blackler, 1995). Knowledge in itself therefore cannot be managed; rather, the management of knowledge can to some extent be supported and facilitated by collaboration and interpersonal communication. Hislop et al. (2018: 42) summarise a number of ways of how this can be achieved, some of which will be discussed in this and the following two chapters:

- ◆ Developing a knowledge sharing culture (through rewarding people for sharing);
- ◆ Facilitating the development of organisational communities-of-practice;
- ◆ Providing forums (electronic or face-to-face) which create opportunities for social interaction between people;
- ◆ Implementing a formalised 'mentoring' system to pair experienced and inexperienced workers;
- ◆ Designing job roles to facilitate and encourage inter-personal communication and collective problem-solving.

This chapter summarises and discusses the practice-based perspective on knowledge management, including questions around knowing and know-how, differences between embedded and embodied knowledge, formal and informal knowledge ritual practices, and the role that emotions can play in knowledge management. It also introduces the idea of communities-of-practice as one specific approach to knowledge management that is in line with this practice-based understanding of knowledge. It is important to note that, while ICT was a key element in the knowledge activities discussed in Chapter 3, according to the practice-based perspective on knowledge, ICT-based repositories are not very useful for the storage and documentation of knowledge, as critical (tacit) elements of knowledge will always be missing even once the knowledge has been codified. Some of the ICT-supported activities in Chapter 3 can

therefore potentially enhance certain knowledge practices (e.g. to facilitate communication, or to identify experts within the organisation), but it will always require people interacting and engaging in practices to actually produce, create, use, share, and store knowledge.

## **‘Knowing’, ‘know-how’, embedded and embodied knowledge**

Knowledge as understood in the practice-based approach to knowledge management, can better be described as ‘knowing’ or ‘know-how’. This means that know-how is always socially constructed, and therefore subjective and open to interpretation. It does not simply exist out there. Knowing “involves the active agency of people making decisions in light of the specific circumstances in which they find themselves in” (Hislop et al., 2018: 36). Or, in other words, producing new knowledge therefore requires people to actively engage in a process of constructing meaning. But because this process is very much based on people’s interpretation and understanding of various things, knowledge will never be unbiased or completely objective; it is always shaped by the values and culture of those who produce it (Hislop et al., 2018).

This relational understanding of knowledge management or ‘knowing in practice’ was first introduced by Gherardi (2000) and Orlikowski (2002). They argued that the ‘know-how’ (rather than merely the ‘know-what’) is most important to individuals as well as organisations as a whole, because it is based on tacit knowledge and the specific ‘ways of doing things’ within an organisation (Orlikowski, 2002; Clegg & Ray, 2003; Kellogg et al., 2006). Knowing is a social practice, it is enacted through and embedded in people’s everyday activities. It does not simply, “exist ‘out there’ (incorporated in external objects, routines, or systems) or ‘in here’ (inscribed in human brains, bodies, or communities)” (Orlikowski, 2002: 252). Burr (2003: 9) argued that, “[k]nowledge is therefore seen not as something that a person has or doesn’t have, but as something that people do together.” One could further say that knowledge itself is on the one hand embedded in work practices, tasks and routines, on the other hand it is also embodied by the people who carry out and engage in these practices. This means that people’s knowledge can only develop when they conduct activities, engage in practices