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# The Knowledge-Powered Management Consulting Strategy

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## Abstract

Knowledge is critical to business success. But, knowledge, in itself, is not enough to satisfy the vast array of changes in today's organization. Companies need to be more focused on strategic knowledge management due to the hypercompetitive global environment. There is also a reason that knowledge management studies have failed to disclose the nature of filling the gaps between performance and success. In many instances, there is no direct connection between knowledge management models and today's changing situations. Companies in general confront challenging situations in which they need to proactively respond to every environmental demand, a more effective knowledge management model can be a basis for understanding and perhaps anticipating these emerging issues. The knowledge-powered management consulting strategy is a necessary precursor to more strategically managing knowledge within today's organizations. This article is to help management consultants have a better understanding of this new strategy. A knowledge-powered management consulting strategy, that helps management consultants better map the strategic knowledge areas to integrate all organizational components, can increase the chance of overcoming competitive challenges. Organizations need this approach to reach their highest possible potential with a competitive advantage. Much of what we share comes from our consulting experience as senior consultants of McKinsey & Company in the Sydney branch of a Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer.

## Introduction

Analyzing big data and converting this analysis into practical knowledge in organizations is very difficult and requires a knowledge-powered management consulting strategy. This strategy indicates that, to more effectively manage knowledge, management consultants must know that knowledge is a multi-faceted concept that can be categorized into two main strategic areas: tacit and explicit knowledge, and public and private knowledge (Choi 2002). The other key takeaway for management consultants here is that knowledge can be mapped in these two strategic areas, and it is this point that will narrow the gaps between success and failure leading to more successful strategic decision-making.

Digital transformation and making decisions based on data analysis coupled with intuitive decisions are both tempting and exciting (Ahmad et al., 2021; Cochran et al., 2022; de Carvalho Pinto, de Paiva & Mira da Silva, 2022). The most vital attribute is design which draws upon identifying, storing, and disseminating data to all strategic areas of the organization (Klievink et al.,2017; D. da Costa et al.,2019). Companies such as Toyota tell us that organizations should have a deep understanding of their business model to identify the strategic areas of organizational knowledge in technical fields, and the relationships with suppliers, customers, and vendors. For example, our management consulting experience for one furniture manufacturing plant in Milan, Italy shows us that this organization has determined more than 21 strategic areas for its organizational knowledge. Disseminating data on a real-time basis helps not only with decision-making but also adds revenue as resources are moved to vital locations of the organization to meet customer needs (Appel et al., 2020; Röglinger et al., 2022).

## Knowledge in Organizations

First, consultants must understand the concept of knowledge itself. Knowledge is distinct from information and data (Alavi & Leidner 2001; Grover & Davenport 2001; McGill 2006). Data has been defined as raw entities, and information is understood as a meaningful pattern within these raw entities (Bell 1999; Tsoukas & Vladimirou 2001; Wiseman 2008). This is not enough for consultants because knowledge is quite elusive and is changing on a day-to-day basis with discontinued products and the ever-changing vast array of technology. Therefore, to create a better understanding of knowledge, Ruggles (1997) defines knowledge as a blend of information, experiences, and codes, while Paunović (2008) argues that knowledge is a collection of meaningful information. The key takeaway for consultants is that knowledge is a resource that enables organizations to solve problems and create competitive advantage through improved organizational performance.

In this way, one scholar who is well-known in the Academy of Management, by the name of Peter Senge highlights the importance of knowledge for organizations (Garcia-Valdecasas, 2015). Senge says that successful organizations enhance their competitiveness by focusing on learning (Senge, 1997; Garcia-Valdecasas, 2015). Another globally recognized author with over 40 books by the name of Drucker (1998, p.17) comments that “the productivity of knowledge and knowledge workers will not be the only competitive factor in the world economy. It is, however, likely to become the decisive factor, at least for most industries in the developed countries.”

Management consultants often read Drucker's work because it is directly applied to managerial decision-making.

However, only having this understanding of knowledge in itself will not be enough to effectively respond to the issues that come up constantly in our competitive business environment. Consultants should take a step further and help senior managers more effectively manage knowledge within the organization. With a clear understanding of the concept of knowledge management, consultants can help executives make more effective managerial decisions. Knowledge management has been defined from various perspectives. This variation may differ because knowledge management is understood in many different ways and therefore different scholars focus on different aspects of it and offer several options of managerial application. In this article, we will focus on a competitive advantage-based perspective. According to this perspective, for example, Beckman (1999, p.6) explains that knowledge management is "the formalization of and access to experience, knowledge, and expertise that create new capabilities, enable superior performance, encourages innovation and enhances customer value," and Marr et al. (2003) define knowledge management as a set of activities and processes aimed at creating competitive advantage through generating and applying new ideas. Moreover, knowledge management has also been regarded as a "conscious strategy of getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people share and put information into action in ways that strive to improve organizational performance" (O'Dell & Grayson 1998, p.6).

In the next section, we indicate how consultants can take the competitive advantage-based perspective to implement the knowledge-powered management consulting strategy that will create a competitive advantage for corporations.

## The Knowledge-Powered Management Consulting Strategy

A clear understanding of the strategic areas of organizational knowledge is tantamount to the data analysis that will be necessary to lead to the growth and prosperity of organizations (Amidon, 1997; Nisula, Kianto & Andreeva, 2019). Strategic areas of organizational knowledge, from culture to technical knowledge, require identification. The process of identification addresses areas that are needed at certain times throughout the day (Carlsson, 2004; Kayworth & Leidner, 2004), just as traders on Wall Street get hour-to-hour profit and loss summaries to see how successful they are throughout the day and what pivots need to be made to lessen losses.

Once the categorization takes place, we place them on a horizontal diagram of the axes X to Y in Figure 1. One end is tacit knowledge, and the other is explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge refers to the intuitive understanding that an experienced professional. As Michael Polanyi in his book titled Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy in 1958 argues, there must be experience built into the process for it to be successful. For example, consider an experienced doctor who, after years of working, identifies the cause of the disease with just one look at the patient - there is a stage of diagnosis that comes naturally to them. Now in the management consulting world, the key question is why consultants should care whether knowledge is tacit or explicit. The answer is that tacit knowledge is not shared and sometimes bottled up in individuals, causing a bottleneck in the

organization. If knowledge can be categorized as tacit and explicit knowledge, then how can companies manage knowledge to enhance productivity? Since tacit knowledge is the knowledge that exists in the minds of organizational members gained through their individual experiences, and is difficult to formalize and transfer unless directed to do so, executives need to pinpoint and encourage this type of knowledge to be drawn out of subordinates (Sanchez-Segura et al., 2010). Herein, consultants can help executives build an atmosphere of trust and openness and use technology to share tacit knowledge and convert it to explicit knowledge.

Explicit knowledge, which is codified, is based on a step-by-step methodology for learning. This could be quantitative or qualitative but it has a basis of origin that transpires from a system type of operation. An example of this would be past sales corresponding with the inflation rate increase or decrease. In action, explicit knowledge is knowledge that is highly formalized and codified and can be easily recorded and communicated through formal and systematic language, and manifested in rules and procedures providing the necessary tools and processes for executives and employees to manage (Serrat, 2017). Furthermore, Brooking (1999, p.50) posits that explicit knowledge is the “knowledge which a person can make available to another for inspection, review, and possible dissemination if necessary. This may mean it can be explained verbally, but it is generally preferable to codify it, that is, write it down.” It can also be captured in expert systems and tapped by many people throughout the organization via the internet. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 61) who highlight explicit knowledge as “declarative knowledge”, and Saint-Onge (1996, p.10) who elucidates this type of knowledge as “articulated knowledge”. Explicit knowledge is more formal and has the potential to be more easily shared. When it is expressed in words and specifications, it is much more useful compared to tacit knowledge.

Furthermore, along a vertical diagram of the axes Z to W, in Figure 1, the strategic areas of organizational knowledge are grouped into two dimensions: private and public knowledge. Private knowledge refers to knowledge that is specific to a company and should not be identified and imitated by other companies and competitors. Exposing this knowledge would be catastrophic to the organization. We see this with Tesla talent fleeing to the competition, taking secrets that are beyond due diligence and unethical. Due to the strategic nature of private knowledge, a lot of attention and care must be taken in maintaining this type of knowledge, and any disclosure of private knowledge to the outside world greatly increases the operational risk for organizations. A scholar by the name of Matusik (1998, 683), argues private knowledge is “a resource that is valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable,” and therefore is regarded as “firm-specific”. From a strategic management viewpoint, Park (2007) has observed that unique organizational strategies, processes, and practices are examples of this type of knowledge.

Public knowledge, which is not specific to a company and refers to the best practices of the industry, is worth noting and celebrating (Link & Ruhm, 2011; Winter, 2018). For example, Tesla's sales beat all competition in Germany in September 2022. This type of knowledge depicts itself in the form of concepts such as Six Sigma, innovation, ingenuity, inventions, and some aspects of TQM (total quality management). Public knowledge may be an asset and provide potential benefits when posted on social media and other means of communication. Consultants need to consider the ownership of knowledge as a factor that is a significant contributor to the knowledge of organizations. Moreover, Matusik (1998) points out that knowledge

emerges in two additional forms, which is the knowledge that is only accessible by one company and the knowledge that is accessible to all companies. The best consulting approach to knowledge is for consultants to know what knowledge should remain private and what should be made public. Therefore, a mistake in this area may be vital to organizations and consultants must help executives choose wisely.

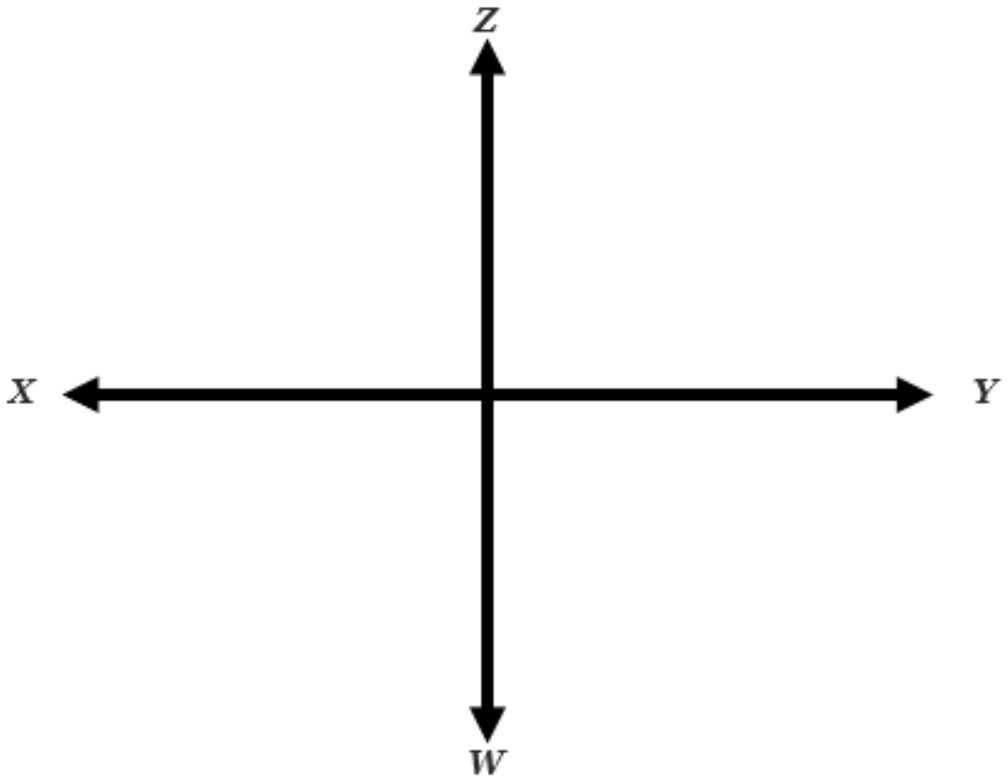


*Figure 1: Mapping the Strategic Areas of Knowledge*

One key function of the knowledge-powered management consulting strategy is to help consultants more effectively develop human capital to create organizational competitive advantage. In this context, training is becoming the forefront of success in organizations worldwide. The more training the better the return on investment to shareholders. Why is this, you may ask? Because learning is a process that leads to acquiring new insights and knowledge, and potentially to correcting sub-optimal or ineffective actions and behaviors that cause companies to spiral out of control (Wiig, 1994; Dorfler, 2010). Consultants should also know that organizational learning is modifying behaviors resulting in newer insight and knowledge (North et al., 2004; Keskin 2005; Sukumaran et al., 2009; Aulakh et al., 2016). Thus, changing the existing behaviors of employees and managers generates new knowledge, and is, therefore, a key factor in improving a firm's competitive advantage (Linderman et al. 2004).

But, how can we better establish the relationship among the knowledge-powered management consulting strategy, organizational learning, and organizational competitiveness? The answer is that the effective implementation of this management consulting strategy requires learning and sharing of best practices and experiences among human resources and thus enhances competitiveness and overall organizational performance (Vera & Crossan 2003; Yang, 2004; Bayyavarapu 2005). Consultants are aware of organizational learning as "a set of actions (knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and

organizational memory) within the organization that intentionally and unintentionally influence positive organizational change" (Templeton et al., 2002, p. 189), as well as "a dynamic process of creation, acquisition, and integration of knowledge aimed at the development of resources and capabilities that contribute to better organizational performance" (Harter, 2002, p. 228). Lau and Tsui (2009) assert that effective organizational learning requires various processes such as knowledge acquisition, collaboration, dissemination, sharing, generation, and storage to acquire knowledge within an organization. The knowledge-powered management consulting strategy can also more effectively put together these various processes of potential contributions to organizational knowledge management. Thus, this management consulting strategy shows that knowledge management improves organizational processes through various knowledge management practices and can also enhance organizational learning and competitiveness increasing both employee engagement and personal development.

## The Proposed Stages for Implementation

As senior management consultants of McKinsey & Company, our observations in the departments of human resources, sales, and operations management in the Sydney branch of a Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer showed us that simply designing and mapping the strategic areas of organizational knowledge provided many practical ideas and useful insights for senior managers. Below are three actual stages we used to implement this approach in the Sydney branch of a Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer.

First, we analyzed our clients and found that the top managers of this Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer in Sydney, Australia, realized that the emergence of tough competitors such as Tesla, Ford, and Honda was capturing market share. For example, in our first meetings with senior managers, one of the senior managers noted that "Honda, Tesla, and Ford are now much more productive than us in the Australian automotive market". We also found that the knowledge related to the goods supply chain was not sufficiently codified. Moreover, its supply chain knowledge was also not sufficiently protected in both public and private dimensions, as private knowledge, and the disclosure of this type of knowledge to the competitors had increased the operational risk of this automotive manufacturer. In our second meeting with senior managers, one of them mentioned to us, "Our corporation cannot effectively guard its key private knowledge". Similarly, another senior manager noted: "I think our company has a big problem here in managing its operational risk management". We also found that this automotive manufacturer had a strong corporate culture that was effective in protecting its supply chain knowledge. Our suggestion of designing and mapping the strategic areas of organizational knowledge created an important initiative in the development of tacit knowledge in different areas that impacted customer purchasing power. For example, in our second meeting, one senior manager expressed that "They always experience a great organizational culture to collaborate and support each other".

In the second stage, and based on our analyses, we started designing and mapping the strategic areas of organizational knowledge that brought practical ideas and important initiatives to the organization. The knowledge that had been defined as tacit and private knowledge was a competitive advantage for this automotive manufacturer. The key was to codify explicit and tacit knowledge and specify the

private security of knowledge to prevent it from leaking out and ultimately causing a sharp increase in operational risk for the organization. We determined documents to prevent spoilers from exiting the organization with vital information. This prevented the increase in the possible disclosure of private knowledge. Tacit knowledge that had been decided to be made explicit was made explicit more effectively by disseminating information through codification and creating corporate ambassadors and customer advocates. Then, we trained people to learn this knowledge and solve possible problems before they escalated and created negative exposure or lower profits.

Next and in the third stage, after 4 months of the implementation of the knowledge-powered management consulting strategy, our meeting with managers and employee representatives of this Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer also showed that they believe that this Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer now better innovated and created new products and services in Australia. For instance, one employee representative mentioned: "Our company is a better place to innovate now". One senior manager also said that "They experience a much more inspiring climate to learn new things and innovate". Just as private and tacit knowledge is a critical area to protect, our survey showed that employees and managers believed that innovations and ideas (tacit knowledge) now better transformed into explicit knowledge which could eventually increase the company's ecosystem value. In addition, the combination of tacit and explicit knowledge in this Japanese multinational automotive manufacturer led to the development of tacit knowledge through the publication of a quarterly newsletter and the sharing of articles by its employees and managers with its employees and managers. This integration also provided an extensive platform for social media and consumer awareness.

## In Conclusion

Companies invest millions of dollars to acquire new knowledge. Now the adage "Knowledge is Power" from Nonaka (1994), has developed into a household word, but many businesses still neglect the strategic management of their knowledge. This neglect can prevent them from growing, flourishing, and gaining a competitive advantage. This article presents a road map for the future of management consulting practices to better manage organizational knowledge, through mapping strategic areas of knowledge. In particular, we showed that by drawing, diagnosing, and designing the strategic areas of organizational knowledge, companies can integrate, codify, and develop a competitive advantage. Done correctly, companies will gain a distinct advantage compared to their competitors and innovate and expand their market share.

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