

INSIGHT

The four states of organisational knowledge

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Tapping into these could accelerate the evolution of an organisation

As organisations increasingly create value out of knowledge, it becomes important to understand how knowledge really resides in them. Once that is understood, ways and means to derive the most value out of existing knowledge need to be designed. Organisational knowledge is present in four key states in a hierarchy.

Factual information

Factual information lies at the bottom of the pyramid. This refers to information pertaining to both the organisation, as well as the environment in which the organisation functions. Information pertaining to the environment includes relevant information related to competition, customers, the broader economy and so on. Knowledge in this state is primarily objective and fact-based, with very little ambiguity. This category of knowledge is quite easy to codify, and hence highly scalable in its availability to everyone.

Personal insight

The active relationship between factual information and an individual produces personal insight. This is an insight that is 'true' to the person who has produced it, but may or may not find acceptance across the organisation. Transactional insights, defined as those produced by simple operations on factual information, find easy acceptance. However, an individual may also possess transformational insights on issues like the direction the organisation must take over the long run. These may not find as much acceptance, particularly if the individual producing it does not have adequate influence in the system.

Organisational insight

This brings together insights from a number of perspectives. At one level it could be viewed as the sum total of personal insights which 'float to the top' i.e. those that find broad based acceptance. An example of this could include any form of intellectual property. At another level, organisational insight



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reflects the sum total of organisational history, values, and principles with regard to various issues. For instance, the propensity to try something that has failed historically for the organisation may be quite low, even if its objective validity has already been established (through personal insights). It's quite clear that this second type of insight is harder to come by since only a few people have access to the full range of information required to possess such insights.

Expertise

At the pinnacle of this hierarchy of knowledge states in an organisational perspective is expertise. Expertise refers to the ability possessed by individuals to effectively orchestrate an interplay between facts, organisational insight and personal insight to arrive at a point of view that is valid for the specific organisation (regardless of its validity in a universal sense).

This is a highly subjective and creative knowledge state, and hence is less amenable (usually) to scalability. It is important to note that an end product of expertise is not just predictable solutions, but also disruptive solutions that are highly specific to the given organisational context.

Too often, breakthrough innovation does not take off simply because of the lack of contextual alignment between the organisation and the idea. Experts help to bridge this gap by figuring out the right ideas that fit the organisation.

It needs to be recognised that the goal of tapping into and scaling these four knowledge states is not to create historical baggage or dogma on how things should done, but to actually accelerate evolution of the organisation through the creation of new knowledge on top of existing knowledge.

The writer is a corporate strategy professional

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