

Debriefing for Knowledge Management

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Abstract. Since the term was coined in the 1970s, debriefing has been associated with military campaigns, critical incidents and accidents. Debriefing has also been used in the health sector and educational settings particularly experience-based learning. However, the application of debriefing for knowledge management is a recent phenomenon which did not attract the attention of many researchers. As knowledge management is considered to be one of the important issues for today's firms, our understanding of the available tools that could be used to improve the identification, creation and sharing of knowledge in organization is necessary and timely. The use of debriefing as a simple, straight forward tool which requires the deployment of resources that are available within the boundaries of organization—knowledge, skill and expertise of employees—is acknowledged. However, there is still a lack of knowledge on how organizations can successfully design, plan and execute debriefing to manage knowledge. This paper is poised to provide an overview of studies on debriefing through the lens of knowledge management. The study contributes to the information systems discipline by revealing the significance of debriefing for effective knowledge management practice based on literature review of previous studies. The study also provides potential future research directions.

Keywords: Debriefing, Knowledge Management, Organizational Learning, Tacit knowledge, Organizational Memory, Tacit Knowledge.

1 Introduction

Studies acknowledged that a considerable proportion of resources are wasted in organizations because of the phenomenon 'reinventing the wheel' [1]. According to the author, organizations often are unable to identify and correct the way they go about doing their work and make adjustments to their processes when these are wrong. [2] also argue that efforts in organizations which could have rectified mistakes fail to do so not necessarily because they lack the know-how. Organizational learning, in many cases, is not made possible because knowledge that resides in one corner of the organization is not transferred to where the particular knowledge is needed to solve problems and provide innovative or new insights. Effective knowledge management can help organizations to make use of the skills and tacit knowledge to overcome problems wherever they arise in an organization [3].

There is plethora of knowledge management tools for organizations to choose from. However, several studies have argued for tools that are relatively simple, straightforward and that can help to tap the knowledge already available within organizations [4]. Debriefing is considered to possess such qualities as a knowledge management tool since it makes use of the resources already available in organizations—tacit- or explicit- knowledge as well as expertise of employees [4-5].

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 What is Debriefing?

Scholars agree that the term ‘debriefing’ has been defined and used to describe different concepts. However, according to [6], there is a common understanding about the conceptualization to mean ‘learning through reflection’ in different settings. Previous studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s acknowledge the application of debriefing for emotional recovery from incidents that are considered to be enduring and critical [7], appraisal of work related activities [8], education [9], or even to improve job performance [10].

Debriefing enables aggregation of lessons, validation and synthesizing to produce organizational learning. Besides, transformation of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge, thus formatting it for dissemination is also possible through debriefing. Thus debriefing is a powerful tool that enables the transfer of knowledge to larger audience and ultimately to the knowledge base of the industry [3]. Debriefing is an integral part of the organization learning process [11]. Debriefing is also considered to be one of the techniques used for transferring tacit knowledge from one person to another [12].

Lederman describes debriefing as the process in which a purposive discussion of experiences of people who had experiences is organized [6]. The process of debriefing is established on two assumptions. The first assumption is that participants are effected by participation in meaningful ways. The second, to provide insights about experiences and its impacts processing, such as discussion of experiences, is necessary [6].

2.2 Knowledge Management

The business environment of the 21st century together with the elimination of political and geographical borders have created a tough competitive situation for organizations [3]. Firms are in a better situation whenever they succeed in rapidly developing new solutions and innovate. The experience from successful global competitors has also shown that it is in the best interest of organizations to manage the knowledge they have to achieve competitive edge against their competitors. Knowledge management, therefore, has attracted the attention of practitioners and researchers alike. According to [13], knowledge management is a management practice which requires the creation, identification, acquisition, transferring as well as sharing and exploita-

tion. Successful companies have demonstrated their ability in utilizing the knowledge they possess to help them manage changes, empower their employees as well as instill a culture which fosters innovation and entrepreneurship. Among the instances where knowledge management is crucial is when an employee departs from his role in an organization—moving to another unit within the same organization, starting his own business, taking up employment in another organization or even retirement [5].

2.3 Debriefing as Knowledge Management Tool

Organizations are having difficulties retaining knowledge and expertise when they can no longer keep those with a valuable skill and knowledge cannot be kept. Several empirical studies have shown that, during tight economic conditions, many firms are left with no choice but to let their experts leave with long experiences and tacit knowledge that could not be transferred to the remaining staff [5]. One of the remedies cited to minimize this problem is debriefing process (also referred to as leaving expert debriefing). Debriefing is found to be invaluable tool to plan and transfer knowledge in most organizations particularly when applied early. The author also describes a debriefing process that could be used by organizations when experts are bound to leave their position either within the firm or when employment is terminated [5].

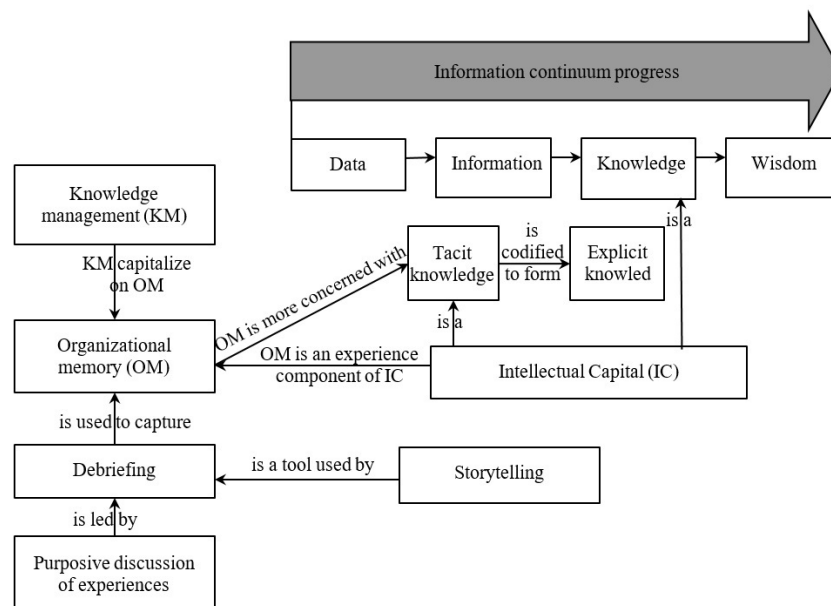


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram depicting debriefing for knowledge management

Central concepts

- **Information continuum progress** consists of four stages such as data, knowledge, information and wisdom [14] as illustrated in Figure 1.

- **Data** are raw materials that is the observations, facts, or figures from which information is obtained [14].
- **Information** is organized data in a logical and cohesive format for a specific purpose [14].
- **Knowledge** is information analyzed, processed, and placed in context. It involves making inferences, recognizing patterns, hidden trends, creating a mental model of the pattern or trend that can be applied with a degree of reliability and predictability in a particular context, it is an elusive and complex process that requires an individual to make values judgments based on prior experiences and understanding the patterns [14]. Knowledge can be explicit knowledge and tacit or implicit knowledge [14]. Employees' knowledge is Human Capital [14]
- **Explicit knowledge** is a knowledge that has been “codified” or “fixed in some format”, that is explained, recorded or documented [14]. Example: manuals, books, notes and so on [14].
- **Tacit Knowledge or implicit knowledge** is the personal, unarticulated, unexpressed knowledge possessed by an individual. Example: tricks, intuition, judgments and the stuffs that make things work [14].
- **Wisdom** is the application of knowledge to make and improve decisions, processes, and productivity, or to yield profits. It requires individuals to be willing and able to absorb information, evaluate, and reflect on that information, decision whether or not to use that information for the specific problem or situations [14].
- **Knowledge management** is "organizing to know" [14], it is a concerted effort to capture critical knowledge, share information within an organization and capitalize on the collective organizational memory to improve decision making, enhance productivity, and promote innovation [14].
- **Intellectual capital** is the intellectual material – the data, information, knowledge/ experience, and the intellectual property – that can be put to create wealth [15]. Also, structured intellectual capital is employees' knowledge turned into a shared firm-wide asset [14].
- **Organizational Memory [OM]** is the experience component of intellectual capital. OM is more concerned with tacit knowledge. OM for a private-sector firm marks in part its capability and in the ultimate, its durability. On the other hand, OM is a constituent ingredient of the organization's effectiveness, its durability being typically protected by the “essential” nature of the public service being provided [15]. OM is also defined as the way an organization applies past knowledge to present activities [16].

3 Research Methodology

This study is planned to be undertaken as a literature review. A literature is invaluable in facilitating theory development as well as uncovering new research areas to fill the knowledge gap identified by previous studies [17]. As discussed previously, the application of debriefing for knowledge management is one of the less explored research areas. Budgen and Brereton identify steps to carry out systematic literature which is robust, comprehensive and replicable [18]. This review starts with a protocol

outlining the data collection and analysis methods and formulating the following research questions:

- How can debriefing be planned, designed and executed in different organizational settings to facilitate organizational learning?
- Which conceptual frameworks and theories are used in the studies?
- Which research designs are applied?
- What conclusions could be drawn from the findings of the studies.
- What are the future research directions?

Major databases indexing reputable journals and conference proceedings in the information systems and cognate research domains will be searched to identify relevant literature for the review. To identify other articles published elsewhere, the list of references of previously identified articles will be scanned manually. Google scholar will also be searched for conducting forward search. The findings of the studies reviewed will be presented according to the research questions.

4 Expected Results and Contribution

A closer look in to studies investigating debriefing reveal that the focus of research is confined within few disciplines. Even though there is a consensus on the significance of debriefing in knowledge management for many organizations across industries, its comprehensive application is not explored yet in many sectors and different organizational contexts. The extant literature focused on applications of debriefing in management studies and team trainings [19], game and simulation [20] as well as in the health care industry [21-22]. To the best of our knowledge, there is no study consolidating the findings of previous studies, particularly in the information systems domain. The main objective of this study is to collect, analyze and categorize the extant literature on debriefing and suggest future research directions. The contribution of the findings of the review will be interesting for practitioners and researchers. The findings of the systematic literature review will be a starting for future studies.

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