

Avoiding the “Army of Professional Amateurs” Paradox

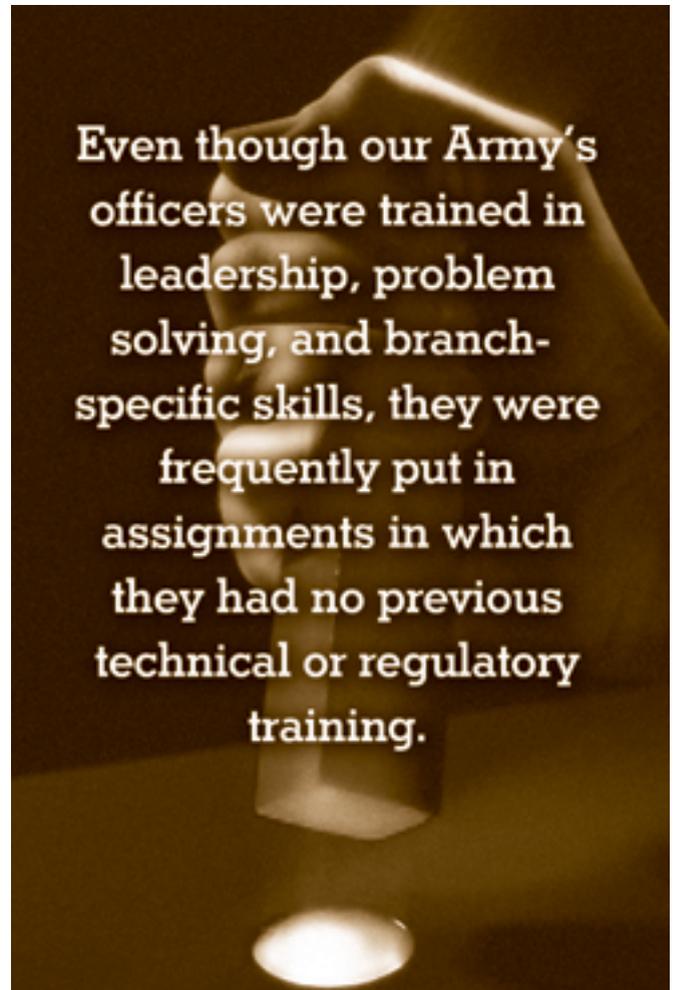
Capturing Tacit Knowledge in Our Workforce

Doug McCallum

I first heard the term “Army of professional amateurs” when I was a lieutenant in Germany in 1982. Our battalion’s most dynamic infantry company commander, Capt. “Napalm” Jackson, had just finished his company command and was assigned to be the battalion S1 while waiting for his next assignment. Jackson had absolutely no training (or desire) to be a battalion S1, which is the battalion commander’s principal staff officer for personnel support and involves responsibility for glorious tasks such as inspecting mail rooms and tracking a multitude of personnel transactions from evaluation reports to urinalysis testing. But, as with any good officer, he quickly learned how to do it.

Jackson used the term “Army of professional amateurs” to describe how, even though our Army’s officers were trained in leadership, problem solving, and branch-specific skills, they were frequently put in assignments in which they had no previous technical or regulatory training. This term stuck with me over the rest of my career.

For branch-specific jobs, the Army provided me excellent training, but every time I had to perform a staff job—which became more frequent as I was promoted to higher ranks—I became an amateur again, having to learn new policies, regulations, office networks/relationships, and the large-scale frameworks supporting Army programs. At the upper levels in the Army and joint Department of Defense organizations, officers had to learn highly complex frameworks such as the Quadrennial Defense Review, program objective memorandum cycle, or training transformation to name a few—for which we did not receive any formal training. We had to teach ourselves the knowledge we needed to accomplish these jobs. It wasn’t until I retired and had the opportunity to study new technologies in knowledge management (KM) and the challenges of our organizations undergoing Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) that I realized that significant opportunities exist for the Army, joint DoD, and federal civilian communities to end the paradox of being a professional amateur. We can grasp this opportunity by teaching our leaders how to leverage KM technologies. Developing KM as a core



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leader competency should be included throughout our leadership’s training and education systems—from the initial entry employee to the senior leader. Ending this paradox will assist the Army, joint DoD, and federal civilian communities in their need to transform to knowledge-based learning organizations.

A note: While the examples given in this article are based on the Army, they can apply to all of DoD and the federal government.

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Turbulent Conditions

Transitions into new jobs for which our leaders are not fully prepared are the norm in the DoD community—both in the civilian and the military workforce. The civilian workforce faces high rates of turnover, the departure of the aging baby boomer population, promotions, transfers, and civilian deployments into combat zones. In fact, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Recruitment and Retention Plan for fiscal years 2003 to 2007 noted that one of the top three issues identified as their most urgent and formidable human capital challenges was training replacements for a projected surge in retirements, particularly in the Senior Executive Service.

One of the biggest KM challenges faces the DoD organizations undergoing a BRAC move. For many organizations affected by BRAC, a high percentage of their current civilian workforce will not make the move to a new location. By some estimates, as much as 70 percent of the federal workforce (and supporting contractors) will not move to new locations. To use a military analogy, the Army's fire support doctrine states that an enemy unit can be destroyed by inflicting 30 percent casualties. This percentage reflects the damage done not just in raw numbers, but to the systems and single points of failures (such as key leaders or logistical support) that will prevent that unit acting in a coherent, synergistic manner. To continue this analogy, the organizations affected by BRAC face a devastating loss of knowledge because some will lose not just 30 percent, but possibly 70 percent of their current workforce.

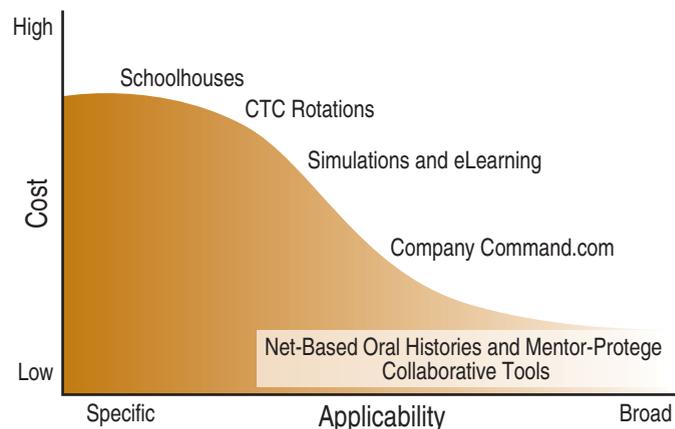
Since DoD has faced these turbulent conditions for many years, the department is often slow to grasp that knowledge loss is an avoidable situation.

Different Types of Knowledge

Most knowledge constructs establish a difference between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. **Explicit knowledge** is easy to capture and transfer. This is the knowledge that is documented and stored—files, standard operating procedures, continuity books, presentations in shared folders, or collaborative portals/sites. **Tacit knowledge** is knowledge that people carry around in their minds, therefore, it is difficult to access. Tacit knowledge is considered more valuable because it provides context for people, places, ideas, and experiences. The tacit aspects of knowledge are those that are difficult to codify and are typically transmitted via training or gained through personal experience.

Tacit knowledge may seem a simple idea, but its implications are large and far-reaching. If important knowledge is tacit, then it is difficult to effectively spread throughout an organization. This often means that useful knowledge will not be able to reach those who need it without direct, face-to-face contact. It also means that training newcom-

Examples of Evolving Tacit Knowledge Capture-and-Transfer Systems



ers in an organization is very time consuming because newcomers must learn their new job while simultaneously perform their new job duties. This results in a high degree of inefficiency, slowness of job execution, and increased costs of making mistakes, whether these mistakes are in combat or in the acquisition community's cost-schedule-performance environment. These costs could otherwise have been avoided through capturing the wisdom gained by others and transferring it to the new leader.

Timely, Costly Knowledge Capture Methods

The Army has many ways it has transmitted tacit knowledge—from the observer controller in the combat training centers, to the publications of the Center for Army Lessons Learned, to what was one of my favorite readings—the series of e-mails sent to the field relaying issues important to top leadership called *Random Thoughts While Running* by the former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Dennis Reimer.

Even though DoD and the Army have frameworks in place to capture and transfer hard-won experience, those methods are typically highly resource- and time-intensive methods of transferring tacit knowledge directly to emerging leaders—schooling or a combat training center rotation, for example. These methods are also typically branch-, rank-, or unit-specific, and they may not be directly applicable to those moving into staff jobs involving the administering of DoD programs.

Flattening the Knowledge Transfer Methods

The figure above provides a few examples of the Army's evolution of tacit knowledge technology. The flattening effect shows increased applicability with lower costs. The forces causing this flattening effect are the same as those described by Thomas Friedman in his book, *The World is Flat*. Friedman's context is a discussion of the new age of globalization and how 10 phenomena, or "flatteners," have enabled, empowered, and enjoined individuals and small teams to have transformational impact on their global competitiveness. Specifically, this new-world flat

platform is a convergence of the personal computer, fiber optic cable, and newer forms of hardware and workflow collaborative software, which allows for the building of the knowledge worker. This convergence now provides the opportunity to access highly efficient, low-cost technologies that can exponentially increase the Army's and DoD's ability to capture tacit knowledge and transfer it to developing leaders.

There have been a number of technologies enabling or facilitating explicit knowledge management practices such as document management systems, shared files and folders, portal-based digital environments, and organizational knowledge flows (process charts and continuity books).

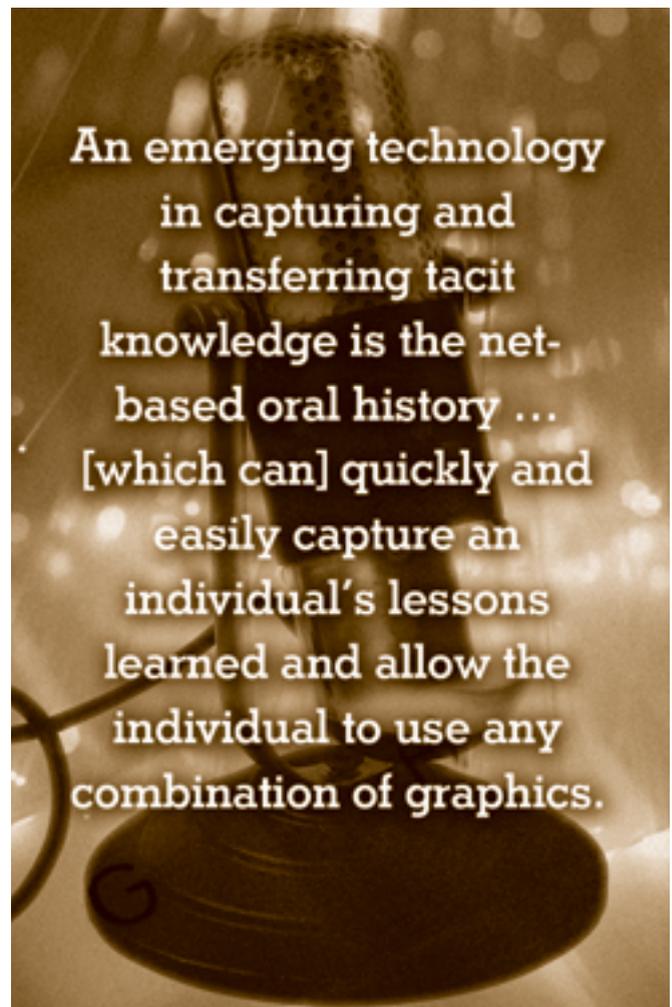
One technology that has become highly effective in recent years for transferring explicit knowledge is online classes, or eLearning systems. These online classes have developed from earlier versions that were of questionable effectiveness to recent versions that are highly effective, interactive, and well-designed in their ability to allow the student to learn the required knowledge. Examples of such classes are those that are offered by the Defense Acquisition University or DoD's Skillport™ classes. These courses encompass a wide range of subjects from leadership development courses to more technically-based knowledge such as the acquisition workforces' certifications or IT end-user curricula. These classes are truly effective for developing administrative and technical skills, but they frequently do not have the capability of capturing and transferring content-specific, organizationally-unique knowledge such as the tacit knowledge of the company commander operating in an asymmetric warfare environment. It takes a large amount of resources to develop online courses, while new tacit knowledge capture tools allow an organization to capture and share specific, critical knowledge more quickly with far less costs.

Another evolutionary step in tacit knowledge capture and transfer is the <<http://companycommand.army.mil>> Web site, which shares tacit knowledge throughout a specific community of practice and takes the additional step of establishing online protégé-mentor relationships. This community allows those seeking knowledge that will help prepare them for company-level command to connect laterally to a larger world, introducing them to many styles of leadership and issues of battle-ready command. It creates an opportunity for the learning curve to begin well before officers actually take command of a company, and the learning and contribution continues through their years in command and beyond. However, the Company Command site still relies on written documents, lessons learned, and other knowledge that is time-consuming to codify, and it fails to use emerging, efficient, key-word-searchable audio-visual capture technology that allows for increased tacit knowledge capture and transfer.

Each of these evolving knowledge capture-and-transfer systems reduces the cost of capturing and transferring knowledge while expanding the number and types of users who can access this knowledge.

Taking Online Learning to New Dimensions

An emerging technology in capturing and transferring tacit knowledge is the net-based oral history. This off-the-shelf technology is inexpensive, easy to use, and provides a broad range of applicability. It builds on a net-based portal system's capabilities, encompassing communities of practice, hosting shared explicit knowledge (i.e., shared folders and files), providing information security, and linking protégé-mentor relationships through collaborative connections. Net-based oral histories add another feature to capturing tacit knowledge. They quickly and easily capture an individual's lessons learned and allow the individual to use any combination of graphics (such as PowerPoint® slides or whiteboard concept sketches) to visually supplement the oral history, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the knowledge transfer. This technology is similar to that found on YouTube, but it provides a structured and focused learning message. Most importantly, it can be searched by key words in order to go to that specific part of the oral history that is relevant to



the knowledge seeker. This is a big improvement over current Army video KM systems, in which the user must watch hours of video in order to obtain the few nuggets of pertinent knowledge.

Oral histories have a broad level of applicability. If you are a company commander about to deploy to combat, a colonel about to report to the Office of Congressional Affairs, an acquisition professional taking over a project office, or an Army civilian hired for a position at an organization's post-BRAC location, you can go straight to the part of the oral history (or key meeting) that has the relevant information you need to increase your knowledge to effectively perform your job. It is this ease of collection and access, as well as the ability to codify pertinent and in-depth tacit knowledge that makes this next step in technology innovative and highly useful in DoD's efforts to build knowledge-based learning organizations. The oral histories can apply to the warfighting community, the acquisition and technology community, or any other DoD community. They are an innovative way of solving the knowledge gap between the aging federal workforce and the younger workers. This increase in the ability to collect pertinent individual knowledge will enhance organizational performance by limiting the knowledge loss from turnover and will augment the workforce's access to knowledge that is needed to perform their jobs.

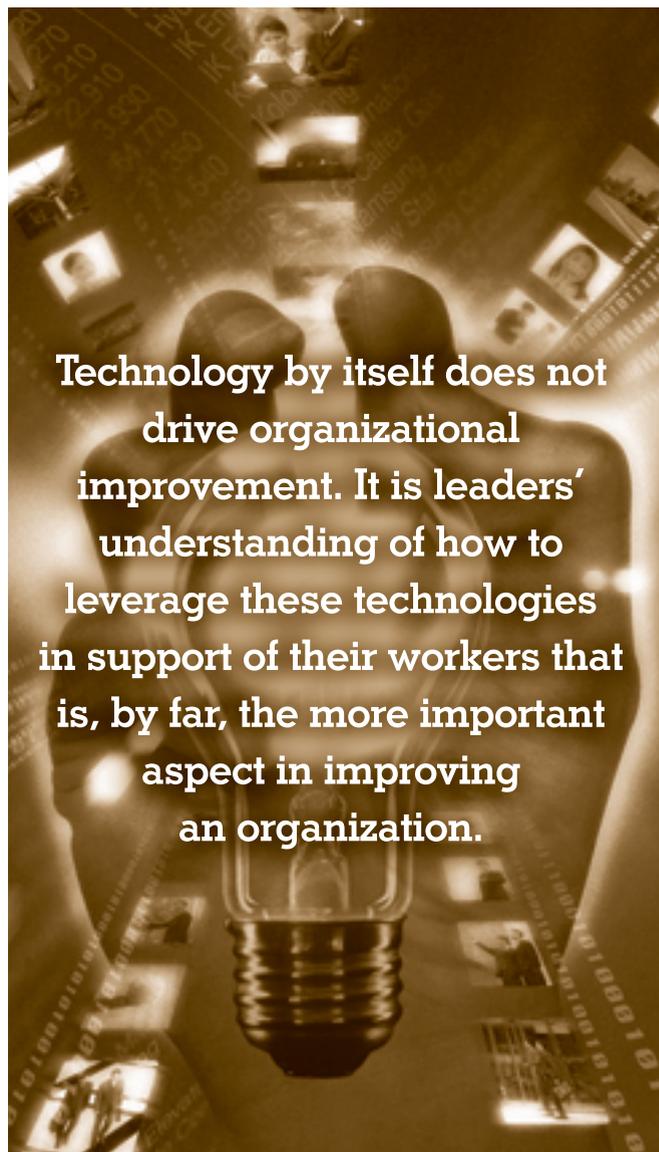
Leaders Drive Change

The efficient codification and use of tacit knowledge has many implications for the DoD's ability to be a learning-based organization, especially because:

- Tacit knowledge is embedded in human capital. This makes it valuable as a strategic advantage fully leveraging the human dimension.
- Exploiting tacit knowledge has been shown repeatedly to be a key ingredient to the innovation process.

The slowness to understand and apply these emerging knowledge management innovations is not due to some inherent failing or an unavoidable human conservatism. Rather, it reflects leaders' limited training and expertise in understanding how to use technical tools to get the most out of their workforce. Where knowledge management courses do exist, they are generally online courses with no professional forcing function—i.e., tied to promotion, organizationally established human capital strategies, or associated leader individual development plans. This lack of core leadership training in knowledge management principles and technologies hinders the transition to a knowledge-based organization.

A word of caution: technology by itself does not drive organizational improvement. It is leaders' understanding of how to leverage these technologies in support of their workers that is, by far, the more important aspect in improving an organization. This leads to the conclusion



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that our leaders must increase their knowledge of learning techniques and apply these tools to improve the human dimension. Applied to an Army analogy, there was once a very wise commander of an Army combat training center operations group who said, "Fire support is too important to leave to the artillery." By this, he meant that the commander had to be intimately involved in the integration and execution of fire support within his commander's intent. Likewise, knowledge capture and transferring techniques are too important to leave to the G6/chief information officer/information technology supporters. Leaders of DoD organizations must get involved in understanding and integrating these new technologies for capturing and transferring tacit knowledge within their organizations.

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