

Tacit knowledge in blue-collar work: how workers use it to fulfil their side of the psychological contract

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Received 27 September 2021
Revised 11 February 2022
12 April 2022
Accepted 14 April 2022

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyse the role of tacit knowledge in fulfilling employees' side of the psychological contract in blue-collar work.

Design/methodology/approach – The research questions are as follows: How is tacit knowledge acquired in blue-collar work and how do blue-collar workers use tacit knowledge to fulfil their obligations within the psychological contract? This qualitative study comprising 30 interviews uses theory-led content analysis.

Findings – Blue-collar workers need time and experience to acquire tacit knowledge. An important aspect of tacit knowledge is knowing the ways in which the work is best done in practice and seeking better ways of doing the job. Workers use their tacit knowledge to perform their work well and efficiently, even in problematic situations, and to improve their work to fulfil their side of the psychological contract.

Practical implications – Organisations should see the value of the tacit knowledge blue-collar workers possess and develop actions that involve the workers in sharing their tacit knowledge and also in planning the actions related to this knowledge sharing.

Originality/value – This study adds to the limited body of studies on the relationship between tacit knowledge and the psychological contract.

Keywords Tacit knowledge, Psychological contract, blue-collar work, Tacit skills

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The psychological contract (PC) has been researched for decades and from many perspectives. Yet how employees meet the obligations of this contract in everyday work has received limited attention. Most PC research is from the employee perspective, and it considers either the contents or formation of a PC or the fulfilment or breach of the contract (Conway and Pekcan, 2019). This study positions itself on the side of contract fulfilment as it analyses how blue-collar workers use their tacit knowledge (TK) to fulfil their own obligations.

In a PC, the employee's obligations to the organisation include in-role obligations, organisation–citizenship obligations and obligations of high performance. In practice, this means promising to work hard and be efficient, being flexible about what is one's part of the job, striving

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Funding: Finnish Work Environment Fund, grant number 190160.



for better ways of doing the job and developing new skills as needed (Bal *et al.*, 2010; Conway and Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1995).

This study focuses on the role of TK in fulfilling the PC in blue-collar work. Such work demands that workers discern any exceptions or problems in the work process and use their problem-solving skills to address them. However, this knowledge often remains confined to the blue-collar workers alone and is never adopted as part of the organisation's official knowledge (Nakano *et al.*, 2013). Thus, to meet their obligations, blue-collar workers need both formal and tacit knowledge. *Tacit knowledge* refers to knowledge that guides one's behaviour but is highly personal, context-specific and, therefore, hard to formalise and communicate (Hau and Evangelista, 2007; Polanyi, 1966).

Blue-collar work is often seen as the opposite of white-collar knowledge work: Blue-collar workers perform labour jobs, and the work is often more physical, whereas white-collar employees usually perform job duties in an office setting. Educational requirements and salaries are also usually higher in white-collar work compared with blue-collar work (Saraç *et al.*, 2017). The knowledge management literature has mostly focused on TK in the context of white-collar work, but there are also some studies on blue-collar workers (Alam *et al.*, 2022; Nakano *et al.*, 2013). Labour process theory has extensively examined the routines, processes and practices of manual, blue-collar work in particular (Burawoy, 1982; Hastings and MacKinnon, 2017). This study does not concentrate on the process itself but on the ways in which workers can affect the work process with their TK and skills to fulfil their part of the PC.

In this article, the research questions concern:

RQ1. How is TK is learnt and acquired in blue-collar work?

RQ2. How do blue-collar workers use TK to fulfil their obligations within the PC?

There are only a few studies on the relationship between TK and the PC. They study, for example, how a PC influences the willingness to share TK (Salazar-Fierro and Melgar Bayardo, 2015; Wu and Yan, 2020). Thus, the present study adds to the limited body of studies on the relationship between TK and the PC. This study makes three distinct contributions. Firstly, it focuses on the rarely investigated blue-collar workers and their TK. Secondly, it expands our understanding of the dynamics of the PC and the reciprocity within it by examining how employees try to fulfil their obligations. Thirdly, it highlights the contents and development of blue-collar workers' TK.

Literature review

Psychological contract

The PC represents individual beliefs about the terms of an exchange agreement between the employee and the organisation (Rousseau, 1995; Rousseau *et al.*, 2018). The origin of the theory of a PC lies in the 1950s when it was used to describe the therapist–patient relationship (Menninger, 1958). Later on, it was brought to work–life studies (Argyris, 1960). The roots of this theory are in social exchange theory, of which reciprocal exchange is a key part (Rousseau, 1995).

The PC is defined as “a cognitive schema, or system of beliefs, representing an individual's perceptions of his or her own and another's obligations, defined as the duties or responsibilities one feels bound to perform” (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018, p. 1). Thus, employees have certain beliefs about what their employer should offer and what they should offer in return (Conway and Pekcan, 2019; Rousseau *et al.*, 2018). Studies have underlined the significance of the promise as part of the agreement: the contract is executed when the employee sees that a certain thing has been promised to them by the organisation. Thus, the perceived promise makes the contract, but the organisation itself should not be seen as a party of the contract. However, a representative of

the organisation can be seen as an agent for the organisation. Consequently, the PC portrays the employee's purely subjective view of the exchange (Conway and Briner, 2009; Conway and Pekcan, 2019; Rousseau, 1995).

The basic type of PC on which all other types are said to be built is the transactional type (De Cuyper and De Witte, 2006). This contract type is based on trade, where the employee exchanges work for payment, and the emotional side of the relationship is minor. Regarding the relational type, the emotional side has a major role as the employee sees that loyalty is the most important part of the exchange. This type, which includes the expectation of reciprocal loyalty from the employer's side, has been considered the traditional type of PC. The balanced contract type combines the emotional and transactional components of the PC. In it, the employees' commitment with the employer is essential, but the willingness to exchange work tasks and continuous development are also emphasised (Conway and Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1995). As all the contract types are about an exchange between the employer and employee, mutuality and reciprocity are essential: is there an agreement between the parties on the terms of the contract and do both parties benefit equally from it (Schalk and De Ruiter, 2019)? Previous research has also emphasised the dynamic nature of the PC as it may change over time (Rousseau *et al.*, 2018).

The PC portrays not only what the employee thinks they are entitled to but also what the employee sees as their duties and has promised to give to the employing organisation. According to previous studies, when employees perceive that their expectations have been met, they feel a stronger obligation to contribute to the good of the organisation, in other words, to fulfil their promises to the employer (Schalk and De Ruiter, 2019).

The promises or obligations of the PC may include, for example, organisation–citizenship obligations, in- and extra-role behaviour, flexibility, ethical behaviour, high-performance obligations, loyalty and employability (Bal *et al.*, 2010; Farnese *et al.*, 2018). In-role obligations involve working according to the standards set for one's job and include, for example, promises to work hard and efficiently, cooperate with and assist co-workers and deliver quality in one's work. Organisation–citizenship obligations involve the commitment to provide discretionary support for co-workers and the organisation's needs and include, for instance, being flexible about what is part of the job and the work hours. High-performance obligations concern proactive efforts, such as looking for better ways of doing the job and for ways to save costs and adapt to changes in the way in which the work is done (Bal *et al.*, 2010). However, employees may expect the employer to behave towards them as though a relational PC exists but perceive their own obligations in more transactional terms (Handy *et al.*, 2020).

Tacit knowledge and skills

According to Polanyi (1966, p. 4) “We know more than we can tell”, and our knowledge can be classified into explicit and tacit knowledge. The latter refers to knowledge that guides one's behaviour but is highly personal and context-specific: individuals have TK in the form of experience, expertise, skills, abilities, actions and know-how (Nonaka, 1994). Because such knowledge is based on individuals' experience, it is difficult to formalise and verbalise (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000; Hau and Evangelista, 2007; Nonaka, 1994), and some things at work just “come with experience” (Asher and Popper, 2019, p. 264).

The idea of TK has been reformulated by dividing it into two dimensions – namely, technical and cognitive skills. *Technical skills* include informal skills, such as know-how, while *cognitive skills* include beliefs, intuition and mental modes. TK is defined in this context as the ability to identify and solve problems and to predict and anticipate problems at work (Harlow, 2008; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Individuals obtain TK through internal processes, like experience, reflection and internalisation; therefore, it cannot be managed and taught in the same manner as explicit knowledge. In addition, it is possible to store explicit

knowledge in handbooks or information systems, but TK is mostly stored only in workers' minds (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000).

TK can take many forms. In the "onion model" of TK (Asher and Popper, 2019), hidden practical knowledge refers to the most explicit and concrete layer of knowledge, which is personal and unknown to the organisation. It means that when experts in certain work are asked how they perform specific actions at work, they can explain it. The second layer is reflective TK, which is more abstract than the previous layer, and thus, the individual is less aware of it. It refers to principles that help the inferences needed for developing preferences or making decisions. They can also be described as "rules of thumb". The third layer is TK that can only be demonstrated and cannot be elicited (Asher and Popper, 2019).

TK is regarded as an important competitive resource for companies and turning TK into explicit knowledge can be a major contribution to organisational functioning (Asher and Popper, 2019; Lipshitz *et al.*, 2007; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). What is less emphasised is that this knowledge also plays a significant role at the shop-floor level. Blue-collar workers develop, share and use TK in their daily duties, and these processes are basic aspects of efficient manufacturing operations (Nakano *et al.*, 2013). Blue-collar work is associated with many stereotypes; for instance, it is seen as highly supervised, routine work (Hennequin, 2007). In blue-collar work, work tasks may be largely standardised and recorded, but it is not feasible to be prepared for all situations and every deviation (Alam *et al.*, 2022). Thus, these unpredictable situations in manual work require problem-solving and creativity (Nakano *et al.*, 2013). Further, this kind of problem-solving requires TK that only comes with work experience (Alam *et al.*, 2022; Asher and Popper, 2019).

In all work, gaining TK depends on collaboration. However, in knowledge work, a negative correlation was found between a transactional PC and TK sharing, and the correlation between a relational PC and TK sharing was found to be positive (Wu and Yan, 2020). In blue-collar work, sharing TK is facilitated by an engaging environment (Nakano *et al.*, 2013), understanding the objectives of management and workers, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, good communication and opportunities for professional training and improvement (Muniz *et al.*, 2011). In addition, on-the-job training has been shown to be an effective way for master workers to share TK with newcomers (Alam *et al.*, 2022).

Previous research on blue-collar work has underlined that sharing TK is facilitated by an engaging environment, which is supported, for example, by a shared language and knowledge, good communication and strong collegiality. In addition, managerial efforts to provide appropriate working conditions and communicate company goals and human resource management practices, such as the provision of formal and on-the-job training, contribute to the creation of an engaging environment (Nakano *et al.*, 2013).

Methodology

Data collection

As the research data, this study uses 30 semi-structured interviews with workers in blue-collar jobs – namely, in property services (henceforth, these workers are called *cleaners*) and the manufacturing industry (henceforth, these workers are called *manufacturers*). The interviewees first responded to a Web survey (N = 1,242) conducted for labour union members. In the survey, volunteers for interviews were sought, and therefore, all the interviewees are union members. In Finland, union membership is relatively common, as more than half of all salaried employees and unemployed individuals are union members (Jonker-Hoffrén, 2019). Among respondents who volunteered to participate in interviews, those with various job titles from different positions of the work organisations were selected. Ultimately, 16 cleaners and 14 manufacturers were interviewed in spring 2020. Two cleaners

were interviewed face-to-face, and because of the start of the COVID 19-pandemic, the remaining 28 interviews were conducted by telephone. The interviews lasted from 20 to 75 min. The interview questions considered job pride, meaningfulness of the work, rewards, expectations and requirements of the work, management style and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviewees gave oral, informed consent to participate in the study after they were informed about the aims of the study, their anonymity, data protection and their right to withdraw their consent. The interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim by an outsourced professional firm. Details of the interviewees and their work positions are given in [Table 1](#).

Data analysis

The analysis follows the idea of qualitative content analysis, which is a systematic and replicable research method to study qualitative data. It is based on explicit rules of coding to analyse patterns in the data (Krippendorff, 2004). The present study takes a deductive approach, and the analytical tool is theory-led content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). The analysis is led by the theories of TK and the PC and especially the employees' duties described in the theorisations of the PC. Thus, the interviews are read through these theories to analyse how the ideas of the theories appear in the context of manual work and in the expressions of blue-collar workers.

The starting point of the analysis was the central obligation of the interviewees' PC: the promise to perform one's job in a reliable manner. From this viewpoint, firstly, all the interview passages (the meaning units) in which the interviewees described what kinds of knowledge and skills they use and develop to do their job well and how they see that their knowledge and skills are and should be used in the organisation were searched. In other words, the analysis concentrates on the ways in which workers fulfil the obligations of the PC: how they look for better ways of doing the job, develop new skills, work hard and remain flexible. That kind of know-how is named here as TK, which is the researchers' conceptualisation, not that of the interviewees. The second phase of the analysis focused on identifying common themes in the interview passages. The expressions and passages under the theme of acquiring TK, seeking better ways to work and working hard and being flexible were grouped together. The results of the analysis are presented under these themes in the next section.

Results

Tacit knowledge in blue-collar work and how it is acquired

According to the interviewees' interpretation, TK is gained over time and with experience. In cleaning work, there are often written work instructions describing what must be cleaned

	Industry	Property services
<i>N</i>	14	16
Gender	8 women/6 men	14 women/2 men
Age, min-max	24-62	30-62
Years in their current work/organization, min-max	Less than 1 year to 30 years	Less than 1 year to 22 years
Job contract type	13 permanent, 1 zero-hour contract	All permanent contracts

Table 1.
Interview data

and how in every location. However, a cleaner with long experience may have better knowledge of how a location should be cleaned, such as in what order the tasks should be done. The cleaners described how it takes time to see how the cleaning can be done fast and efficiently:

For someone who is totally inexperienced in the field, it's impossible to work as I do. I have developed a certain kind of rhythm at work that doesn't develop in a moment. (cleaner)

The interviewee also pointed out that this kind of work, at a meta-level, needs time to be learnt and that supervisors should note that newcomers do not have such skills, which are essential in tightly scheduled work. In a similar vein, another cleaner stated that work experience helps in organising one's work:

With my long experience, I have learned to see and not to clean what is already clean. That is, I concentrate on spots that really need attention. I can clean with my eyes, in a way. [—] And one should use common sense regarding places that are less used. (cleaner)

The cleaner pointed out that being able to “clean with [one's] eyes” is a kind of know-how that cannot be acquired at school but something that she has developed at work. “Seeing” how to clean was mentioned several times, which we interpret as referring to the usage of TK. In the quote above, “common sense” is not something common to all people but only to people who are experienced in cleaning work. In that sense, it is very specific TK. One cleaner described gaining TK as an unconscious process:

I often say to my colleagues that my head is kind of a computer. [—] I'm always a bit confused at first when I start in a new job. But I know that my 'computer' will do the job by itself; I don't have to think about it. But then everything starts to clarify: how to do the job and gather information about people at the workplace, how they are and how they like their premises to be cleaned. (cleaner)

This interviewee has moved from one employer to another several times and has learnt that when starting in a new workplace, she will soon almost automatically learn the rules of the place. Several cleaners described a quite similar process of learning their work tasks in practice by gaining work experience.

In industrial assembly-line work, the pace of work, especially the hurriedness of it, must be learnt as well, and that only happens over time. As one manufacturer described, it takes a long time before one can work at the same speed as those who have been working in the same job for a long time.

Manufacturers also learn from each other. For example, sometimes, there are no clear rules for quality control, and the manufacturers need to negotiate what to do:

[. . .] on quality control, you ponder, 'Is this okay?' or 'Is it not okay?' Then, if I can't decide myself and I feel insecure, I get help. – And sometimes, there are cases where one accepts [the quality] and another rejects [it]. [—] And then we both try to find the golden mean, the employer and the employees. (manufacturer)

This extract describes the manufacturer asking for help and the solution being sought together with the employer, not only by the employees. Thus, seeking out a solution is not done individually but collectively and while working.

Blue-collar employees have a great amount of TK that develops at work. They are also aware of the TK needed to get the work done properly and fulfil their side of the PC that way. According to their descriptions, TK is expertise gained through work and also knowledge developed through negotiations with both the employer and co-workers.

Tacit knowledge and the obligation of seeking better ways of doing the job

Next, the focus is on how TK and skills are used to fulfil the PC's obligation of looking for better ways of doing the job (Bal *et al.*, 2010). One aspect of TK is to know how the work is done in practice, not in theory or on a planning board. The interviewed workers highlighted how they – not the managers or supervisors – are, in fact, the experts on how the work should be done. Thus, they stressed the practical side of the work process over the upper levels' "theoretical" knowledge.

In property services, one of the core disagreements between the workers and their supervisors lies in the work schedules – that is, in how much time is allocated to a certain work task or location. The cleaners know how long proper cleaning takes:

Our schedules are really tight. [...] it feels that there isn't enough time for everything. I have tried to say for those who just sit in the office that they should come and work with us for a couple of days because they just can't know how busy we are, because they haven't been there. (cleaner)

The cleaners have tried to make themselves heard and influence the timetables, but they have not succeeded. That is probably because more generous time slots for work would not be as cost-efficient as shorter ones. In some instances, nobody even knows how much time and effort the work requires. We argue that in these kinds of situations, the workers' TK is clearly acknowledged and utilised:

If there is a difficult task, like a problematic place to clean that nobody really knows how to manage, me and my co-worker are ordered to go to those places. I take it as a compliment, that they trust my skills. (cleaner)

In industrial work, the work arrangements at different work stations are changed occasionally. The workers are encouraged to share their experiences and especially their ideas about how to improve the work process. Yet interviewees felt that the managers do not know enough about the practical work done in the factory, and this complicates the work:

Everything should be, in principle, neatly on the racks, but when they start to plan, the planners are usually people that haven't worked one day at that work station. The plan may see damn good on paper, but when the work really starts, it may not work at all in practice. (manufacturer)

In industrial assembly-line work, the functionality of the workstation is essential. The manufacturers also try to influence the planning of their work environments with their TK and, in that way, ensure the efficiency of production.

Workers reported that in some organisations, although their ideas are listened to, the ideas that directly concern the production process are seldom implemented. Instead, ideas concerning work ergonomics and occupational safety issues are implemented. Thus, for some reason, the workers' knowledge of the work process itself and their best practices are not always used in the planning of work. However, in other industrial organisations, the employees' knowledge is taken into account. The workers have been involved in planning and standardising work tasks and they have been able to give their opinions and describe their own work practices and what they would do to make the job faster and easier. In addition, workers have been encouraged to share any ideas they have about how to improve the work.

The workers see themselves, not the managers or supervisors, as the real experts on how the work should be done. As they stress the practical knowledge of the work process over the upper levels' "theoretical" knowledge, they see their TK as the best starting point for developing the work processes. By doing this, they seem to fulfil the PC's obligation of looking for better ways of doing the job and developing new skills (Bal *et al.*, 2010).

Tacit knowledge and the obligation to work hard and be flexible

This section focuses on how workers use their TK and skills to fulfil their obligations within the PC to work hard and be flexible (Bal *et al.*, 2010). In general, the interviewed workers are ready and willing to work hard and be flexible in their everyday work and fulfil their PC that way. In some instances, completing their work requires using their TK by developing different means of performing it, as one cleaner pointed out:

Sometimes, it is challenging when there is not enough room to use machines. [...] You just can't be helpless; if you don't have something, you have to develop it somehow. There are those kinds of people [who just say that the work can't be done], but I have a different kind of mind. (cleaner)

The cleaner mentioned that not everyone is willing to do their best and put extra effort into the work. However, other interviewees described the extra work tasks they perform as a part of their work.

Manufacturers similarly have knowledge of how the work should be done to keep the assembly line moving and the skills to do this. When an inexperienced manufacturer makes a mistake or has problems, a more experienced manufacturer helps to keep the line going:

There is – in a work station before mine – a mechanic who has been here for less than a week [...] and the part he is installing is not easy: the parts are of bad quality and they break even in the hands of experienced mechanics. If it breaks, I have to wait that the car is kicked forward and then write onto a card that there is this broken part or do my own work really quickly and then run to the former station and report the problem there. (manufacturer)

The worker knows the reasons behind the problems in the production process: poor-quality parts and inexperienced workers. He can ensure the work quality by making a report of the fault after he has done his own task or by running to the previous workstation to make the report before the line moves.

Those manufacturers who have extensive TK and skills bear the responsibility for the whole production process. In fact, they choose whether to complete other manufacturers' tasks when they are unable to do them themselves or wait until the fault is spotted in the final inspection. If they choose to do the extra work, they need to put extra effort into it and really hurry to correct the fault. However, several interviewees shared that they prefer doing this extra work instead of just reporting faults and letting their co-workers correct them later.

Blue-collar workers use their TK to find ways of completing tasks, even in difficult situations. They find ways of working with limited tools and put extra effort into correcting faults, even those made by other workers. By doing extra work, they aim to complete their tasks and, in that way, fulfil their implicit promises to their employer within the PC.

Discussion

This study analysed how blue-collar employees use TK to fulfil their side of the PC. According to the findings, blue-collar workers have a great amount of TK, which they use to get their work done properly and fulfil their implicit promises within the PC. They described skills and meta-work, interpreted here as TK, as expertise gained through work over time and also through negotiations with both the employer and co-workers. Such knowledge acquisition and sharing are in accordance with earlier studies on blue-collar work (Alam *et al.*, 2022; Muniz *et al.*, 2011; Nakano *et al.*, 2013). The results show that workers see themselves as experts on how the work should be done, and by developing their work, they aim at achieving the best possible result from their work. In so doing, they fulfil their obligations within the PC to seek better ways of doing the job and developing new skills.

Some of them feel that their knowledge is often overridden by supervisors, and this may prevent them from fulfilling their obligations. However, in some organisations, the workers' knowledge is taken into account, which helps the workers feel that they are fulfilling their PC. A positive relationship between an organisation's approach to knowledge exploitation and prospects for the career success of blue-collar workers has been found, which may ultimately improve business performance (Cillo *et al.*, 2019). Thus, organisations should also put effort into using the TK of blue-collar employees. Blue-collar workers also use their TK to find ways of completing their tasks even in difficult situations, such as working with limited tools or correcting faults in the production process. This kind of TK fits with the idea of hidden practical knowledge, which is gained through work experience (Asher and Popper, 2019).

Implications

In the industries studied here – the manufacturing and property services industries – workers' TK is sometimes used but more often passed over. As TK is regarded as an important competitive resource for companies (Asher and Popper, 2019), as a practical implication, it is suggested that employers should recognise and appreciate blue-collar workers' tacit skills.

The sharing of TK and explicit knowledge must be managed differently. Many traditional methods of knowledge diffusion, such as lectures and manuals, are unsuitable for TK, and this also applies to blue-collar work. More suitable methods could include, for example, apprenticeship, direct interaction and networking (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000). These proposals are supported by the findings of this study as well as actions that involve workers in sharing their TK and also planning the actions related to sharing this knowledge. By involving workers, it is possible to plan the kinds of actions that are most suitable for them.

As a theoretical contribution, the study revealed that it is fruitful to combine the conceptualisations of the PC and TK to shed light on work practices that often remain unnoticed.

Conclusions

This study highlights that blue-collar workers hold a great amount of TK of how their work should be done in a way that it is both cost-effective and physically safe. By using their TK, they fulfil their obligations within the PC. Organisations should recognise and appreciate blue-collar workers' TK as an important competitive resource.

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