Knowledge may be embodied tacitly in the experience of an organisation’s members, as well as explicitly in its files and records. This paper compares the knowledge management tasks facing government and non-government organisations in the field of anti-corruption. The prevention of corruption has become an important part of the Australian aid program. Aid officials have become involved in the transfer of knowledge about corruption, including knowledge held by domestic anti-corruption agencies, such as the New South Wales Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), and knowledge generated by non-government organisations like Transparency International. Government and non-government organisations may need to manage their stocks of knowledge differently, but both face problems of deciding whether their knowledge is true or false.

When Transparency International’s founders went to the Ford Foundation for funding they were asked ‘where is your intellectual capital?’, that is, what was the store of knowledge on which their arguments against corruption were drawn. They scrambled to assemble it, particularly the Transparency International Source Book (authored by Jeremy Pope) and the controversial corruption perceptions index (devised by Johan Lambsdorff). Now Transparency International’s website provides a vast menu of toolkits, lessons learned and best practices in dealing with corruption. It is drawn on by aid donors, among others, as they develop strategies to prevent corruption. One of Transparency International’s founders, Fredrik Galtung sees ‘knowledge management’ as one of the organisation’s critical tasks.

Knowledge management is an issue, in a different way, for official anti-corruption agencies. Knowledge is embodied in the professional expertise of investigators, or the experience of managers. Data and information are stored in files and emails. An Independent Commission Against Corruption is typically divided into three prongs: investigation, prevention and education. Each relies on different professional skills, and plays different role in relation to knowledge. Investigation is typically a process of discovery—looking for new patterns in existing information, gathering new information, testing out explanations, and turning the results into a story that will...
convince a court or tribunal. Corruption typically takes place in secret, so investigation may require special techniques like hidden cameras or microphones.

Prevention asks slightly different questions about the information thrown up by investigations, and has a different audience. It looks at how a particular act, or type of act, might have been prevented, and turns the results into a story that will convince a public service manager to change their procedures. Prevention may draw on the same store of information as investigations, but may also look in social science journals, or try to link its knowledge to other arguments for reform in the public service.

Education has a third take on the knowledge stored in the ICAC. It must reframe and represent it to specific, different audiences: public servants, potential whistleblowers, members of the public, or schoolchildren. The ICAC’s press office also plays an important part in managing knowledge about investigations through the media.

Knowledge management is also an issue in an ICAC’s relationship with other government agencies. How and how much should it share and trade information with the police or other security agencies? Issues of security and privacy may serve to limit the flow of information, and hence the possibility of knowledge. It is also accountable to other actors and agencies. It must keep information that an auditor may request, some time in the future. It must transform its information about cases into statistical data to include in future reports to the legislature.

This paper is intended to introduce a discussion of knowledge management, transfer and research for government and non-government agencies dealing with corruption. The prevention of corruption has become an important part of the Australian aid program. Aid officials have become involved in the transfer of knowledge about corruption, including knowledge held by domestic anti-corruption agencies, such as the New South Wales’ ICAC, and knowledge generated by non-government organisations such as Transparency International.

The paper draws on several literature reviews and Bryane Michael’s recent writing on anti-corruption campaigns. The paper also draws on my own experience of these non-government organisations, anti-corruption agencies and academic relationships in several overlapping contexts. I have been running a training course with the Corruption Prevention branch of the NSW ICAC since 1997. This involves considering what counted as useful knowledge for officials in anti-corruption agencies from a wide range of countries, and how the knowledge students bring to a course relates to the knowledge embedded in academic journal articles. Students also typically do a small research project as part of their assessment, raising questions about similarities and differences between academic and policy-related research.

What counts as ‘knowledge’?

Knowledge is often defined as the top end of a hierarchy of knowledge, information, and data. Information and data can be stored in files and discs, but it does not become useful knowledge until it processed in the minds of individuals and is presented in the form of words or graphs. Its representation in words and symbols makes it a collective as well as an individual phenomenon, defined as ‘justified belief that increases an entity’s capacity for effective action’ (Alavi and Leidener 2001:4).

Much of the research on knowledge management goes back to the distinction made by the philosopher Michael Polanyi between ‘tacit’ and ‘explicit’ knowledge (Polanyi 1962). Tacit knowledge is specific to a particular context, often unspoken, and
acquired by trial and error, or watching how others do it. Explicit knowledge is more universal, codified, and acquired by formal education and training. An example of tacit knowledge is the ability to drive a car. Explicit knowledge is set out in the car’s manual or handbook which prescribes when the oil should be changed. They may be differently valued. Police dramas on TV often unfavourably contrast the ‘book learning’ of desk officers with the well-honed instincts of their counterparts on the street. John Le Carre (I think) invented the phrase ‘tradecraft’ to describe the tacit knowledge of spies. Tacit knowledge may become codified in manuals, or statements of official doctrine set out in speeches by chief executives, or annual reports to the legislature. In the other direction codified knowledge may become tacitly understood through training courses, internships, or apprenticeships. The distinction applies in all kinds of professional contexts, including teaching and academic research (where tacit knowledge may include grantsmanship, and how to get published in the right journals).

As these examples show the relationship between tacit and codified knowledge is often one of power and authority. The official text often holds an authority that is resisted by the instinctive wisdom of the street, field and caseworker. The extreme case is when knowledge is codified as law. In some cases, however, ‘street wisdom’ ‘experience’ and other forms of tacit knowledge may trump ‘fancy qualifications’ and ‘book learning’. Authority does not always lie with the text.

Both non-government organisations, like Transparency International, and official anti-corruption agencies, like the Independent Commissions Against Corruption, generate and trade in data, information and knowledge. So knowledge management provides a useful framework for comparing and distinguishing between them. It also provides a way of bringing academic researchers, thinktanks and the media into the picture. It opens up the ‘fourth wall’ dividing the actors on the stage from the audience—in this case relationships between the agencies and academics and journalists watching them perform.

**What counts as ‘research’?**

Knowledge management also asks about the role of research—however that is conceived—and the role of expert witnesses, consultants and advisers. ICACs, non-government organisations and academic departments all claim to be doing different kinds of research about corruption and anti-corruption (including research into the agencies themselves as well as the problems they deal with). Research may include assembling material from files, analysing statistics, making phone calls, searching the web, looking at press clippings, ringing up experts, interviewing witnesses and reading academic journal articles. Some agencies have specialised departments dealing with research, and appoint full-time research officers, while others mainstream the research in other activities or treat it as incidental to other work. Different parts of a single agency—for example the three prongs of an Independent Commission Against Corruption—may do different kinds of research, and conceptualise and value it differently.

The relationship between academics, non-government organisations and government agencies is often fraught. Transparency International’s founders speak of an early awkward encounter with academics. One describes how they were refused entry to a meeting of political scientists in Berlin, on the grounds that nothing practical could be done about corruption. More recently academics have started to do research on or in Transparency International, and aroused
sensitivities about the organisation’s self-image, history, ‘dirty linen’ and the degree to which it should be transparent to outsiders.

Transparency International itself became divided over the organisation of research, leading to a split between its founding fathers, as Jeremy Pope and Fredrik Galtung left to form the breakaway organisation, Tiri. Within Transparency International there has also been a long-running internal debate about the role and status of individual members and the National Chapters of the organisation. It is partly a debate about knowledge, with the individual members selected by the founding fathers of Transparency International for their tacit knowledge of networks, contacts and ability to open doors. They tacitly knew who to speak to and how to get things done.

Knowledge management in anti-corruption campaigns

The phrase ‘knowledge management’ was coined in the 1980s, and most of the work has been on the private sector, and in the context of Information Technology (Nutley et al. 2004). Transparency International’s websites are a major part of its activities, and Hong Kong’s ICAC website is particularly elaborate and informative as well as bilingual.

Research on policy transfer has looked at how knowledge about policy is transferred between countries. International organisations like the United Nations or the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) play an important role in formalising and transferring knowledge. Transparency International was set up precisely to provide a non-government counterpart for knowledge about corruption. My own research on policy transfer in the Pacific islands looked at how the idea of a Leadership Code was transferred from Africa to Melanesia in the 1970s, at the introduction of Transparency International chapters in the 1990s, and at the work of the OECD’s Financial Action Task Force in pressing island governments to adopt new laws against money laundering (Larmour 2005) in the 2000s. I was particularly interested in what made transferred policies ‘stick’.

The only work on knowledge management in anti-corruption I have found is in a series of stimulating articles and a working paper by an economist, Bryane Michael (2004a, 2004b, 2004c and 2006). These have grown out of, and reflected on, his work as an academic, trainer and consultant on donor-sponsored anti-corruption campaigns. In these papers a wide range of concepts is rapidly introduced—sometimes rather falling over each other. Unusually, Michael has tried to theorise about (endogenise, in his economic language) the relationship between theory and practice.

Michael (2004a) notices the rapid diffusion of anti-corruption programs throughout the world. The literature on policy diffusion distinguishes two kinds of process: one coercive, involving the interests of powerful players, and resistance to their ideas; the other more diffuse, in which ideas flow more readily, and are copied eagerly—perhaps inappropriately—by their recipients. Michael argues that both approaches are dealing with ‘knowledge about policies’ but faults them for not recognising the role of policy knowledge managers who recognise the need for tacit as well as codified knowledge, if the transfer is to succeed.

Michael (2004c) returns to the lessons purportedly learned from the anti-corruption projects in Africa. He looks at the anti-corruption recommendations made by the participants in the World Bank-sponsored Anti-Corruption Core course piloted in several African countries. He scores these for their specificity, relevance and ‘fit’ with local thinking, and finds them generally low on each factor. The programs, he says, seem to
refer to each other, rather than specific, local circumstances. However he commends a project involving Nigerian judges for higher levels of specificity, relevance and fit—though conceding that its effectiveness was yet to be shown.

Michael’s working paper for the Utstein group of European aid donors (2006) evaluates their anti-corruption projects in terms of whether they based on recipient needs, consider the environment in which they are operating and adopt knowledge management principles—and generally finds them wanting.

### Processes of knowledge management

In their review of the literature on knowledge management, Alavi and Leidner (2001) identify four general social processes

- creating knowledge
- storing and retrieving it
- transferring it, and
- applying it (2001:11).

This tends to frame knowledge as something external, to be manipulated, rather than a process embodied in particular people, and their relationships with each other. But it helps raise questions for non-government organisations and anti-corruption agencies.

### Creating knowledge

Creation can take place within both elements of Polanyi’s tacit-explicit pair, and by movement between them. In the latter case Nonaka (1994) has identified four modes

- socialisation—tacit to tacit (for example, apprenticeships)
- externalisation—tacit to codified (for example, best practices)
- internalisation—codified to tacit (for example, training)
- combination—codified knowledge is reorganised (for example, literature review).

An anti-corruption agency, for example, may have formal training courses, or rely on tacit socialisation of its new recruits. A non-government organisation may actively seek out examples of best practice, or review the academic literature on corruption and anti-corruption.

Alavi and Leidner (2001) identify the following research questions

- what conditions facilitate creation and sharing?
- what cultural as well as technical issues are involved in sharing versus hoarding knowledge?
- do closely-knit networks reduce opportunities to encounter new ideas?
- how is externally generated information evaluated for internal use?
- does the absence of shared context inhibit adoption of outside knowledge? (2001:21).

### Storing/retrieving knowledge

Organisational memory may be systematic, and explicit, or episodic and context specific. An official anti-corruption agency may create a complex filing system. The need to justify its action, or in inaction, to outsiders, and the need to present cases to tribunals or courts may encourage systematic record keeping. But this stored knowledge may be hard to understand without knowledge of the context in which it was created. ‘Old hands’ may have to be consulted to help make sense of it.

Organisational memory may be particularly problematic for a non-government organisation that relies on volunteers, or short term contracts of employment. But the internet has radically reduced the costs of storing and
retrieving knowledge for non-government organisations.

Alavi and Leidner’s (2001) research questions include

- what are the incentives for individuals to contribute their knowledge to the organisation? What are the incentives for secrecy?
- how much contextual information needs to be stored to make sense of information?
- is stored knowledge accessed by individuals who don’t know the originator?
- what mechanisms—push or pull—are most effective? (2001:22).

**Transferring knowledge**

Knowledge may be transferred between individuals, groups and organisations. The degree of transfer depends on factors such as the perceived value of source’s knowledge, the motivational disposition of sources (to share), and the receiver to learn, and the existence and richness of channels (formal and informal; personal and impersonal, including new technologies). Aid donors, like AusAID, and non-government organisations like Transparency International are now actively involved in trying to transfer knowledge about corruption and how to prevent it (Larmour 2005). Alavi and Leidner’s (2001) research questions include

- how can the organisation encourage the use of available knowledge (against distrust, lack of time, preference for routine)?
- what factors contribute to the knowing/doing gap and how can they be reduced?

**Applying knowledge**

Knowledge may be applied by directives, which are rules, standards and procedures for non-specialists, or by routines that allow specialists to apply knowledge without articulating it. It may also be applied by self-contained task teams. An example of the former might be rules requiring government officials to report their suspicions of corruption to the specialists at the anti-corruption agency. An example of the latter might be the requirement that a Corruption Prevention Specialist be routinely coopted into any investigatory team. Non-government organisations may create similar rules and routines about their own knowledge. Alavi and Leidner’s (2001) research questions include

- how can the organisation encourage the use of available knowledge (against distrust, lack of time, preference for routine)?

**Hiding and forgetting knowledge**

So far, we have been assuming that knowledge is a good thing, and that the more it is shared the better. But organisations also keep secrets and forget information, in systematic ways (Thompson and Wildavsky 1986). An anti-corruption agency must keep certain kinds of secrets. For example, an investigation may be compromised if officials know they are being watched and their conversations recorded. But the agency may also use secrecy to cover up its mistakes, and avoid accountability.

Agencies may forget knowledge through long-term processes of misfiling or through shifts from paper based to electronic forms of storage. They may more deliberately forget
embarrassing knowledge, for example about their behaviour under a previous director, or regime. Forgetting may be no bad thing—a well-established body of knowledge, institutionalised in a filing system, can blind an agency to new kinds of challenges.

Investigations—like the current Australian Cole Commission, which is looking at the Australian Wheat Board’s payment of kickbacks to Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq—uncover floods of emails and telegrams from which they must establish who knew what and when. In this particular case, ministers have defended their ignorance by saying that they, or their staff, cannot be expected to read everything that comes across their desk, or that the information produced by intelligence agencies was ‘unprocessed’ and hence its significance unrecognised. It seems they did not want to know.

There may also be a trade-off between knowledge and effective action. Organisations have to decide at what point they know enough to charge an official, or take a case to court or a tribunal. Senior officials may feel they are overloaded with information. They will not read beyond the first few paragraphs of a report, or demand an ‘executive summary’, or prefer verbal to written briefings.

Secrecy is an issue for anti-corruption non-government organisations in a different way, and awkward for an organisation with ‘transparency’ in its name. Transparency International was set up precisely to expose the ‘open secret’ of corruption in international business transactions. Everyone knew in a tacit, sotto voce, informal way that corruption was going on in international business. But no one talked about it in the formal sessions of meetings of international organisations, or wrote about it in their reports. Transparency International thus brought it out into the open, able to be codified, quantified, and made the subject of consultancy reports and feasibility studies. Whether this is increased official talk leads to action is another question, which can be asked of much other official talk.

Truth and falsity

So far we have treated ‘knowledge’ in a neutral, inclusive, sociological way—we have not asked if it was true or not, merely if it carried authority, or credibility. We know, for example, that bodies of professional knowledge—for example in medicine or physics—that were once regarded as true, are now regarded as false. Thomas Kuhn’s famous book on *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) describes the process of paradigm shifts between periods of normal science. Similar paradigm shifts must have gone on in the bodies of professional and academic knowledge associated with corruption. The rise in economic thinking about corruption is one example. The medical profession has initiated a process of self-reflection on the empirical foundations of its doctrines in the movement for ‘evidence based policymaking’ (Nutley et al. 2002). A similar process may be overdue in the anti-corruption industry, among anti-corruption agencies as well as non-government organisations.

References


Hovland, I., 2003. *Knowledge management and organisational learning: an*


Acknowledgments

The research for this paper was funded from an Australia Research Council Discovery Grant DPO 344125 part of the project ‘Transparency International and the Problem of Corruption’. An earlier version was presented at a workshop hosted by Centro de Investigacao e Estudos de Sociologia ‘European Anti-Corruption Agencies: Protecting the Community’s Financial Interests in a Knowledge-Based, Innovative and Integrated Manner’ held in Lisbon in May 2006. I am grateful for comments made there, comments on an earlier draft by Fredrik Galtung, and to Paul t’Hart, visiting the Australian National University, who put me on to some of the literature on knowledge management. Responsibility remains my own.