



# Reviewing SECI and Absorptive Capacity for Tacit Knowledge Capture: The Managerial Mental Models in Workplace

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**Abstract.** The emerging of informal digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams and Telegram has increasingly replaced conventional formal channels, transforming how tacit knowledge flows and is managed. The context of this communication is well-rich with unique experiences, intuitive and unstructured insights that critical for innovation and performance. This tacit knowledge is remained difficult to recognize, assimilate and apply to be used externally by the manager. Considering the role of manager's mental model in ensuring the levels of socialization, externalization, combination and internalization remain challenged. Through qualitative research, we gathered insights from selected highly experienced managers in service industry to adequately justifying the needs of capturing the value of experience in this contemporary digital communication platforms. The research contributes to the organizational policies and decision-makers to understand this approach.

**Keywords:** Absorptive Capacity Theory, Tacit Knowledge, Manager Mental Model

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Digital Communication

In contemporary organizations, informal digital communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and Telegram are increasingly supplementing or even replacing traditional formal channels. These platforms enable rapid, context-rich interactions that often convey tacit knowledge—the unstructured, intuitive, and experiential insights crucial to innovation and productivity (Adesina & Ocholla, 2024). However, the informal nature of these exchanges and the cognitive filters of decision-makers can result in underutilized knowledge assets (Lee, 2023).

Recent studies emphasize the strategic importance of informal digital communication in knowledge sharing and organizational learning. For example, digital environments

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have been shown to enhance knowledge creation and collaboration by facilitating the conversion of tacit to explicit knowledge across virtual teams (Cerchione et al., 2024; Moraes, Silva & Oliveira, 2020). Moreover, the mental models of managers internal cognitive frameworks that influence perception and decision-making play an important role in interpreting such knowledge (Zhang et al., 2025; Halmetoja, 2025).

This study explores how managerial mental models affect the recognition, evaluation, and application of tacit knowledge shared through informal digital communication platforms. While we do not aim to investigate psychological dimensions per se, we focus on how managers perceive and act upon unstructured information shared in day-to-day digital interactions (Nkowa Njampa, 2024; Seghroucheni & Lazaar, 2025).

To frame this inquiry, the research integrates Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization) with the concept of absorptive capacity, defined as an organization's ability to identify, assimilate, and exploit external knowledge (Zhang & Huang, 2020). This dual lens enables a nuanced understanding of how digital workplace interactions mediated by informal platforms influence the effectiveness of managerial knowledge utilization in dynamic environments (Zhang et al., 2025; Buunk, 2020).

The study then integrates Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model with the concept of absorptive capacity to examine how managerial mental models affect the capture, interpretation, and application of tacit knowledge in the digital workplace. By linking the dynamic processes of knowledge creation (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization) (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) with the organization's ability to recognize, assimilate, and exploit knowledge (absorptive capacity) (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), this research provides a framework for understanding and enhancing managerial effectiveness in an era dominated by informal, technology-mediated communication.

## **2. Digital Communication Platforms**

The dynamics of information flow and managerial effectiveness have changed in modern businesses as informal digital communication platforms have progressively replaced official channels. Tools such as WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, and Telegram facilitate rapid, context-rich exchanges that foster the sharing of tacit knowledge experiential, intuitive, and unstructured insights vital for innovation and performance (Yeh, 2022; Tseng et al., 2020). Despite their potential, such knowledge often remains underrecognized or underutilized, as it is embedded within informal interactions and filtered through managerial cognitive biases. This shift presents both opportunities and challenges, with managers frequently overwhelmed by the volume and immediacy of digital communications. The study explores the implications of this transformation for organizational knowledge management, communication effectiveness, and decision making in the digital workplace.

Informal communications platforms have replaced the formal form of communication. This indeed struggling organization to maintain the flow of effective communication, this impact of the outcome of the managerial efficiencies. Managerial often found

overwhelm with the digitalization of modern communication such as WhatsApp, Telegram and other form that seem replacing the common ground of communication. In the digital workplace, informal communication platforms have become integral to organizational life, enabling rapid, context-rich exchanges among employees. These interactions often involve the sharing of tacit knowledge, experiential, intuitive, and unstructured insights that are difficult to codify, yet critical for innovation and performance (Yeh, 2022; Tseng et al., 2020). However, such knowledge frequently goes unrecognized or underutilized due to its embeddedness in informal digital interactions and the cognitive filters of decision-makers.

Managerial mental models as the internalized cognitive frames through which managers perceive and evaluate information play a crucial role in determining whether such tacit knowledge is seen as valuable, trustworthy, or actionable (Bushe & Marshak, 2021; Smith et al., 2020). In digital contexts, where ambiguity and data saturation are high, these mental models often default to habitual or risk-averse patterns, which may block recognition of novel insights contributed by employees through informal channels (Janssen et al., 2021).

Although SECI theory (Nonaka & Takeuchi) and absorptive capacity (Zahra & George) remain foundational in knowledge management, contemporary scholarship highlights the need to update these frameworks to reflect technology-mediated knowledge flows and managerial cognition under digital overload (Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019; Zhang et al., 2023). The intersection of tacit knowledge sharing, managerial mental models, and digital communication thus presents a critical gap in current organizational learning theory.

## 2.1 Tacit Knowledge

Following fast digital transformation, formal systems and informal digital platforms like WhatsApp, MS Teams, Slack, and Telegram are overwhelming modern organizations with an excessive amount of data. Numerous tacit insights, which are experience-based, context-dependent, and intrinsically challenging to codify, are carried by this tsunami of unstructured knowledge, which is frequently shared informally among personnel. Organizations are severely limited in their ability to identify, understand, and successfully assimilate this knowledge, despite the fact that it is frequently the most abundant source of innovation and adaptive decision-making (Yeh, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

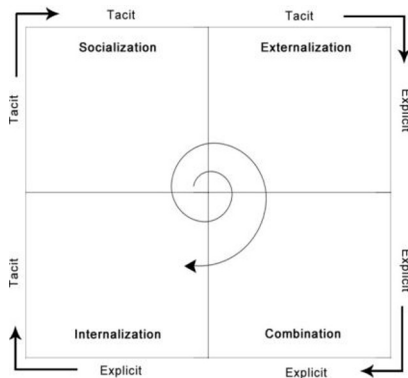
Current knowledge management theories and techniques are still mostly focused on explicit, documented knowledge assets, even though tacit knowledge plays a substantial role in determining organizational outcomes. The cognitive limits of managers exposed to unstructured, real-time interactions in tech-mediated situations are rarely taken into consideration by existing models (Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019). In these situations, managers' mental models that is, the cognitive schemas that direct focus, interpretation, and reaction become crucial in determining what information is preserved, rejected, or changed. But little is known about the theoretical processes by which these mental models mediate the process of absorbing knowledge, especially when it comes

to unofficial digital communication and employee co-creation activities (Smith et al., 2020; Bushe & Marshak, 2021).

### 2.2 Theoretical Foundations: SECI Model and Absorptive Capacity

The SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) remains one of the most cited frameworks in knowledge management, modeling how knowledge transitions through four modes: Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization. The model captures the cyclical process through which tacit knowledge becomes organizationally actionable. However, its application has largely focused on structured or formalized knowledge environments.

Furthermore, while foundational frameworks such as the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi) and absorptive capacity theory (Zahra & George) have long been used to explain organizational knowledge dynamics, their applicability in today’s fluid, decentralized, and digital-first organizational environments demands theoretical extension. There is a growing scholarly call to revisit these models through the lens of managerial cognition and informal communication ecosystems particularly given that the misalignment between tacit knowledge recognition and managerial decision making poses a critical threat to organizational agility and innovation (Janssen et al., 2021; Tseng et al., 2020).



**Figure 1:** SECI model developed by Nonaka (1994), Nonaka et al. (1994), Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), Nonaka et al. (2000), (2001a), Nonaka & Toyama (2003)

Figure 1 is a diagram that explain the tacit and explicit knowledge and how it is interrelated between them. This model works as a guidance to understand the flow of knowledge. Knowledge can come from different aspects and it may start either from socialization, externalization, internalization or combination. Although previous studies have indicated that the needs of applying two or three areas in understanding the knowledge process, we argue that with the current technology and mass information available, thus it is flexible. Accordingly, studies indicate the organization is an urgent need to focus on the tacit knowledge exploration. Thus, this study further explores how

managerial mental models interact with SECI processes and absorptive capacity, especially in settings where large amounts of tacit knowledge are exchanged informally. Addressing this theoretical gap is crucial not only for advancing knowledge management and organizational learning theories but also for helping modern organizations better leverage employee insights to support decision-making in complex and rapidly changing environments.

Recent research emphasizes the importance of situating the SECI model within digital and informal communication platforms, where knowledge is often co-created in real time (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). This calls for updated interpretations of SECI that consider platform-mediated socialization and more dynamic, non-linear knowledge conversion paths. Alongside this, the absorptive capacity framework (Zahra & George, 2002) explains how organizations acquire, assimilate, transform, and apply knowledge. In digital contexts, these processes are influenced by factors such as cognitive load, attention distribution, and managerial sensemaking (Zhang et al., 2023; Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019). However, current models rarely examine the role of managerial mental models as cognitive filters within this framework, particularly regarding tacit knowledge emerging from informal interactions.

While the SECI model explains how tacit and explicit knowledge are created and shared, its integration with absorptive capacity theory reveals both opportunities and challenges in managerial practice. Through externalization and combination, managers can articulate and structure knowledge that strengthens their ability to recognize and assimilate new insights; however, this process is often constrained by cognitive biases and rigid mental models that limit openness to novel interpretations (Chatterjee et al., 2018; Nonaka & Toyama, 2015). Similarly, internalization supports the transformation of explicit knowledge into tacit routines that enhance exploitation capabilities, yet it may also reinforce existing practices and hinder innovation if not critically evaluated (Kahrens & Früauff, 2018). This suggests that while SECI provides the mechanism for knowledge flow, absorptive capacity determines the extent to which managers can truly leverage these flows for strategic advantage, underscoring the need for organizations to foster reflexive and adaptive learning cultures to overcome managerial inertia.

### **2.3 Tacit Knowledge and the Influence of Information Digital Communication**

Tacit knowledge is referred to inherently experiential, uncodified, and embedded in human interactions where knowledge is widely recognized as a critical driver of organizational learning and innovation (Yeh, 2022). In the modern digital workplace, platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Microsoft Teams have become central to informal employee interactions, serving as rich but under-acknowledged channels for tacit knowledge exchange (Tseng et al., 2020). Unlike formal documents or systems, these digital tools foster real-time, context-rich micro-conversations that encapsulate practical insights, emotions, and social cues (Treem & Leonardi, 2013).

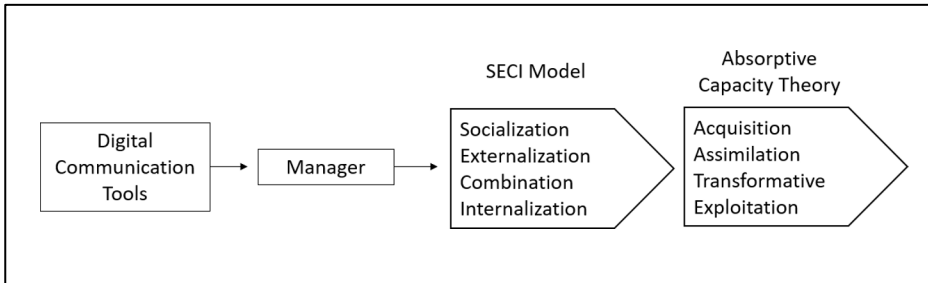
However, this informalization of knowledge flow creates challenges. The high volume and unstructured nature of these interactions often overwhelm organizational fil-

ters, leading to fragmentation of knowledge and underutilization of employee contributions (Yeh, 2022; Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019). Despite the visibility of communication, much of the value remains tacit and invisible to formal decision-making processes.

### 2.4 Manager’s Mental Model

Mental models refer to internal cognitive frameworks that guide how individuals perceive, filter, and respond to information (Senge, 1990; Smith et al., 2020). In the managerial context, these models shape the evaluation of informal knowledge: what is seen as credible, what is dismissed, and what is acted upon. When faced with tacit signals embedded in digital chat or informal employee conversations, managers rely heavily on these internal schemas to make sense of complexity (Bushe & Marshak, 2021). We argue that although the mental model’s heavily relying on the manager, we note that is not the case. The responsibility held by these managers to act upon the needs for organizational future is essential.

Recent studies show that managerial attention and mental framing significantly influence knowledge interpretation, particularly in high-volume, low-structure digital environments (Janssen et al., 2021). These is considered as external factors that may leading to the scoping the ideas of the knowledge and with mass-information especially in digital environment. However, little is known about how these mental models interact with the processes of knowledge conversion or organizational learning, particularly in relation to informal, tech-mediated communication. We also note that individual perceptions and understanding are varies depending on their background and working experience. This might influence how they interpret the idea behind each of the tacit knowledge.



**Figure 2:** Illustrate Manager's Mental Model

The connection between micro and macro levels in organizational knowledge processes becomes clearer when combining the absorptive capacity theory (ACAP) with the SECI model. The SECI model, proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), explains how tacit knowledge and information are created and shared through four modes: socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. Meanwhile, absorptive capacity refers as a firm’s ability to recognize, assimilate, transform, and apply external knowledge for organizational benefit. These component complements the process of knowledge conversion (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). It is

significantly important to seek either the knowledge has been well established and understood by the manager.

Second, this integration highlights the practical alignment between tacit and explicit knowledge. While the SECI model describes the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, ACAP operationalizes these processes by embedding them into organizational routines such as acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). Consequently, the micro-level dynamics of SECI reinforce the broader capabilities outlined by ACAP, offering a more holistic perspective on knowledge utilization. The micro-level of the tacit knowledge is challenging for some. Organizing the knowledge by its process acquire skills and effective decisions because of manager's often felt overwhelmed.

Third, managers hold a particularly important role in this integration. As we address in this study, manager is becoming the intersection between the employees and managerial team where they are leading the decisions, collecting valuable information and pass to the relevant stage. As primary decision-makers, they act as filters, interpreters, and evaluators of knowledge especially tacit insights acquired through informal interactions and digital communication platforms (Lewin, Massini, & Peeters, 2011; Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Their cognitive frameworks and mental models influence how effectively knowledge is externalized, assimilated, and applied throughout the organization. However, we also argue that the demographic profile of manager may influence how they interpret the ideas. Interpretation is an initial stage according to ACT, thus, it creates pressure and also arguments that later may affection the validity of the knowledge.

## 2 Methodology

To address the research objectives, a qualitative research design was adopted, employing five semi-structured interviews with participants occupying managerial to senior managerial positions, each with a minimum of five years of professional experience. Participants were purposively selected through LinkedIn and official organizational websites to ensure alignment with the study's criteria, particularly in relation to tacit knowledge and managerial decision-making. Identifying suitable participants proved challenging due to the specificity of the required attributes. Each interview, conducted online and lasting between fifteen and thirty minutes, was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, with consent forms distributed and secured prior to data collection.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative data analysis application to facilitate the systematic coding and theme development. We posit two important analytical strategies namely thematic analysis and interpretive analysis, guided by the methodological principles of Lub (2015) and Weyant (2022). This strategy allows the identification of recurring themes and the interpretive to reveals managerial understanding embedded within the responses based on the research questions.

The qualitative approach proved critical in advancing a nuanced understanding of managerial practices related to tacit knowledge. As previously discussed, examining the complexities of knowledge exchange within digital communication platforms is particularly salient when framed through the SECI model. The in-depth interviews generated rich insights into how managers receive, filter, and interpret knowledge flows, thereby offering a deeper appreciation of the decision-making processes at play. More broadly, the findings illuminate the mechanisms through which tacit knowledge is transformed and operationalized as it transitions from informal digital platforms to managerial cognition and practice.

### 3 Findings

The findings reveal that managers' mental models significantly shape how knowledge is created, interpreted, and applied within service organizations. A recurring theme was the recognition that engaging with diverse groups and perspectives can disrupt rigid organizational assumptions and generate new insights. As one executive coach explained,

*"If you connect with a diverse group it shakes your ideas ... some of these organizational strategies are quite inflexible ... that kind of approach can make use of social media rather than the traditional approach"* (MB1, Executive Coach). This suggests that openness to non-traditional platforms, particularly digital communication channels, enables the socialization of tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) while also enhancing the acquisition dimension of absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Managers' mental models here function as enablers of boundary-spanning knowledge flows, bridging informal and formal learning processes.

At the same time, managers emphasized that access to diverse knowledge is insufficient without effective evaluation mechanisms. One managing director noted, *"In a social network, there are a lot of ideas ... what is needed is to have a quality platform and measure of the quality ideas, and that goes back to the typology of people who visit and why they participate"* (M2, Managing Director Customer Engagement). This reflects the assimilation stage of absorptive capacity (Zahra & George, 2002), where knowledge must be filtered, interpreted, and connected to organizational contexts. It also illustrates the combination process within the SECI model, where explicit knowledge from multiple sources is integrated and refined. Importantly, managers' mental models act as a cognitive filter, determining which ideas are recognized as valuable and which are disregarded, thereby shaping the trajectory of organizational learning.

A further theme was the perceived limitations of traditional organizational models, particularly in dynamic environments such as health and social care. One executive coach argued, *"We cannot continue the old model ... if we empower people, connect and make the best useful tools available to them ... what is the best thing is not necessarily told to them"* (MB1, Executive Coach). This demonstrates a transformative

mental model, oriented towards adaptation and empowerment, which resonates with the transformation dimension of absorptive capacity (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). By encouraging employees to articulate and share new perspectives, this approach also reflects externalization within the SECI framework. Such findings highlight how managers' willingness to challenge established methodologies enables organizations to adapt to uncertainty and co-create innovative practices.

Managers also underlined the role of storytelling and knowledge diffusion in embedding new knowledge into organizational routines. A global marketing leader explained, *"How to tell the story in different ways ... using reference, video case studies ... post them onto the webpage, inform them like LinkedIn/Twitter/FB ... talk about our capabilities and prove to people we can help day-to-day business"* (MA8, Global Marketing Leader, Company A). This narrative demonstrates the internalization process of SECI, whereby explicit knowledge communicated through stories and case examples becomes absorbed and enacted by others in practice. At the same time, it reflects the exploitation stage of absorptive capacity, where knowledge is applied to create value for customers and enhance competitiveness. Managers' mental models here are oriented towards legitimacy-building, as they frame knowledge communication as a means to establish trust and demonstrate organizational capability.

Finally, managers acknowledged the challenge of decision-making under conditions of information overload. One managing director remarked, *"You collect massive information ... you go to the platform and create and see the ideas, consumer ideas ... as soon as they found the school for your kids, you can go to different ideation platforms"* (M3, Managing Director Customer Strategy). This reflects the tension between access to abundant data and the cognitive capacity to process it effectively. From a theoretical perspective, this corresponds with the assimilation and combination processes, where managers must filter and selectively integrate information to guide decision-making. Here, mental models act as critical interpretive mechanisms, distinguishing relevant signals from noise and enabling action despite complexity.

Taken together, these findings show that managers' mental models are central in linking the micro-level knowledge conversion of the SECI model with the macro-level capabilities described by absorptive capacity theory. Openness to diversity fosters acquisition and socialization, evaluation mechanisms shape assimilation and combination, transformative thinking drives externalization and transformation, storytelling enables internalization and exploitation, and cognitive filtering supports decision-making under overload. Thus, effective knowledge management in service organizations depends not only on processes and capabilities but also on the interpretive frames through which managers perceive, value, and act upon knowledge

## 4 Conclusion and Future Works

The connection between micro and macro levels in organizational knowledge processes becomes clearer when combining the absorptive capacity theory (ACAP) with the SECI model. The SECI model, proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), explains how tacit knowledge and information are created and shared through four modes: socialization,

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**Disclosure of Interests.** None

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