

## Behind The Curtain Of Success: Investigating Tacit Knowledge Transfer And Its Impact On Technopreneur Success Of ICT Smes In Malaysia

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### Abstract

*This study aims to assess what and how the form of tacit knowledge transfer by the ICT entrepreneurs (technopreneurs) can be done to ensure the entrepreneurial sustainable success of this industry in Malaysia. The lack of attention on the role of tacit knowledge in sustaining technopreneurship and how this knowledge can be transferred from individual entrepreneur to their organizational workforce become the fundamental issues discussed in this study. The data gathering process uses semi-structured interview on fifteen (15) technopreneurs from various demographic categories that consist of small and medium size of enterprises (SMEs) in the ICT related businesses. The findings from the thematic analysis have found that the transfer of tacit factors like continuous learning, leadership, collaboration, mentorship, and networking efforts possess the co-occurrence relationships with the entrepreneurial sustainable success factor to ensure long-term performance, besides other tacit factors that have been identified. The findings of this study indicates that the development of tacit knowledge among technopreneurs must be taken into serious account in order to progress and sustain the ICT business and be fortified through internal and external partnership and the effective use of tacit knowledge to intensify the business performance.*

**Keywords :** *Tacit knowledge transfer, technopreneurship, continuous learning, networking, leadership, mentorship, collaboration.*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, just like other countries, has experienced rapid growth in the information and communications technology (ICT) in these past few years. Despite that, there are many issues and problems that have arisen in sustaining ICT technology-based SMEs in Malaysia especially the home grown one. Some of them are financial capital deficit (Jaish et al., 2023), lack of experienced managers (Abdulaziz et al., 2023), weak self-resilience (Hamid et al., 2023), ever-changing political environment (Alnassar et al., 2020), market domination by foreign companies (Rahim et al., 2019) and lack of required knowledge (Shukor et al., 2022). These have caused many of ICT based entrepreneurs in Malaysia to become unstable and consequently faced uncertainty of their future growth.

Many research on entrepreneurship in Malaysia have been focused chiefly on explicit factors, for instance, performance (Ong et al., 2016; Fuzi et.al, 2021; Chipfunde et al., 2021), social and gender (Adnan et al., 2016; Wendy et al., 2014; Isa et al., 2022), attributes (Baskaran et al., 2019; Musa, et al., 2021; Noor et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the tacit factors have been given so much less attention due to the difficulties in measuring and identifying

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these very important facets in the process of building and preserving a company sustainability. Therefore, this study will investigate the importance of tacit knowledge in thriving ICT technology-based entrepreneurship, specifically in Malaysia.

Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is not easily transferred between individuals (Nonaka, 1994), but could be absorbed through experiences and various skills (Arnett et al., 2021) to ensure the continuance, sustainability and success of a company be preserved. For Malaysia as a progressive nation that currently heading towards becoming a fully developed country by 2025, ICT entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly important to ensure the country's ability to compete in the global market. According to the report by Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2020, Malaysia ranks among the Southeast Asian countries with a moderate entrepreneurial index. Thus, it adds up to the importance as to why the need to study the topic such this must be given due attention.

### 1.1 Research Problem

Technopreneurs' sustainability in sustaining their ICT business is an important aspect to drive business growth (Abed, 2021). On the other hand, their contributions to national economic and societal growth is undeniable. Despite of being successful technopreneurs, research gaps remained around understanding the contribution of tacit knowledge on their entrepreneurial sustainable success (Davila et al., 2019), the importance of developing tacit knowledge among entrepreneurs (Popaitoon et al., 2021) and how can this tacit knowledge be transferred (Lamperti et al., 2023a) particularly in ICT sector which is always evolving dynamically over time. Tacit knowledge surely plays a pivotal role in various aspects of sustainability. However, research about how tacit knowledge could be transferred and how it is related to ICT entrepreneurs' ability to sustain the entrepreneurship that they are attempted are still very limited. Transferring tacit knowledge between individuals and organisation is a crucial element in achieving entrepreneurial sustainability. The manifestation of tacit knowledge can include skills, experiences, norms, and dynamic values according to individuals' understanding, but it can't be easily recorded, expressed or transferred because of its subjective nature. Therefore, there is need to investigate the best method to transfer tacit knowledge to ensure businesses to stay competitive and able to develop long term sustainability, not just domestically but also globally.

### 1.2 Research Questions and Research Objectives

Table 1 : Research Questions and Research Objectives

RQ	RO
How can tacit knowledge be transferred effectively among individuals and organisations in this sector?	Identifying tacit knowledge transfer strategies by ICT technopreneurs.
What is the most effective tacit knowledge transfer?	Identifying the most effective tacit knowledge to sustain ICT technopreneurship.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the current globalisation epoch and intense competition, the role of knowledge has become extremely critical to preserve entrepreneurship sustainability (Alerasoul et al., 2022). One of the very important sources of knowledge development is tacit knowledge, the type of knowledge that always being ignored which is hidden and difficult to articulate (Clegg et al., 2003), but extremely important to maintain entrepreneurs' sustainable success (Lamperti et al., 2023b). Hence, the research about tacit knowledge which contains its roles,

utilization of tacit knowledge among technopreneurs, its development and transfer of the tacit knowledge becomes the basis of this study.

In the field of organisation development, knowledge is one of the most crucial factors in achieving performance. Knowledge can be classified into two parts which is explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is objective, logical and has its own technicality, and can be expressed and articulated to other parties deductively, in records and empirically (Xie et al., 2022). On the other hand, tacit knowledge is subjective, hidden in the cognitive realm, and depicted from past experiences (Stokvik et al., 2016). According to Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), tacit knowledge consists of membership and personal skills that are expressed through actions and unconscious behaviours. This knowledge is often linked with innovation, competitiveness, and business continuation among entrepreneurs (Cabana, 2021).

### **2.1 The Development of Tacit Knowledge Among Technopreneurs**

For most entrepreneurs, tacit knowledge is often expanded through experiences, observations, and trials (Chukwujioko, 2013). However, the process of developing tacit knowledge among technopreneurs still cannot be clearly stated. One of the hypotheses explains that the process of developing tacit knowledge happens through social interactions among individuals and organisation environment (Pokrovskaia et al.). Most research about tacit knowledge are focused on companies that have succeeded and in the context of organisation management but seldomly debates this issue in the context of entrepreneurial sustainable success factors.

### **2.2 The Transfer of Tacit Knowledge in ICT Firms**

The transfer of tacit knowledge is one of the more challenging aspects for any technopreneur, while the effective transfer of knowledge is fundamental in increasing entrepreneurs' performances (Hafkesbrink, 2010). However, the methods of transferring tacit knowledge is still a questionable moves in most cases due to indirect disposition of its attribute (Argote, et al., 2000). Thus, there is a need to conduct more in-depth studies in this matter. The technology sector is one of the very important fields in the context of tacit knowledge because from this tacit knowledge, technology-based companies form their competitive advantages. According to BusinessTech (2020), many ICT-based companies suffer from brain drain because many ICT projects or those related are contract-based. This means that workers are employed in large numbers in the form of specific employment period until the project is completed and those engineer personnel will be disbanded once the task is accomplished. This situation is very detrimental as the expertise of those technical experts are not pre-recorded before their departure.

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

In this study, 15 ICT technopreneurs have been selected and interviewed and have reach idea saturation level where the data has become repetitive for the subsequent participants. There are several methods used to ensure the sampling process, as well as data collection methods through the effective semi-structured interview so that the data collected are reliable and possess high validity. Here are the explanation of each of those elements:

### **3.1 Sample Selection Criteria**

Before starting the sampling and interview processes, the researcher selects the appropriate ICT company for the purpose of this study. The researcher uses resources such as industry reports, company registration data, and online searches to identify companies that meet these criteria. Those companies will then be contacted for an appointment with the relevant technopreneurs for an interview session. Below are the criteria sets by the researcher for the company selection process:-

Table 2 : SMEs Selection Criteria

Criteria	Attributes
No of years of Establishment	Minimum 3 years
Type of company	Private limited and sole proprietors
Size	Small and medium enterprises
Yearly Sales Revenue	Minimum RM300k
No of Staffs	5 and above
Industry Focus	ICT

It is expected that this study able to provide a complete picture of the tacit perspectives of technopreneurs, while sharing the experience and challenges faced by them in the Malaysian context in order to give the idea how they are able to preserve the sustainability of the organization in a long-run. This study will use purposive sampling, and similar set of questions for all participants to increase the perception of the reliability and validity of the research.

### 3.2 Sampling Strategy

To select suitable respondents among ICT technopreneurs, purposive sampling method is used. This method allows researcher to select the participants with relevant knowledge and experience in the field of ICT. Therefore, the researcher ensure that the participants of this study meet certain criteria set such as small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), experience in the field of ICT business, and operational period of the business of at least 3 years. In this study, 15 ICT entrepreneurs were selected as a sample of the study. Among the types of businesses involved in this sampling are from system integration companies, software and equipment retailers, telecommunications and internet equipment reseller, public computing vendor, mobile applications and other related ICT businesses.

### 3.3 Reliability and validity of research

Reliability refers to the consistency of research results (Golfashani, 2003; Nha, 2021 ). To ensure reliability, researcher uses a systematic and consistent set of questions for all respondents. The researcher also verifies the responds from participants based on evidences from the available literatures. In addition, the researcher also ensure that all sources of information obtained from the respondent are reliable by pre-determined criteria via purposive sampling set earlier. Validity, on the other hand, refers to the degree of accuracy of the research results in describing the phenomenon to be studied. The validity of this research is enhanced by using the triangulation method, where data analysis is executed through various perspectives and comparisons are made between the opinions from different participants as well as the extensive library references. Therefore, the conclusions drawn are based on comprehensive information.

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures and Interview Protocol

In this research, the data collection method used is semi-structured interview. It is a process where researcher will discuss with respondents their views, experiences, and opinions related to the topic of the study using pre-determined set of open-ended questions. The interviews are conducted on a one-to-one basis, enabling researcher to obtain more detailed and comprehensive information from participants. As the data was taken, participants were explained what is meant by tacit knowledge and how it differs from explicit knowledge.

## 4.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The researcher uses thematic methods for qualitative data analysis to understand and interpret the collected data from the interview. It requires the researcher to take an inductive approach, focusing on the understanding the codes and themes provided by respondents to the issues and topics discussed in this interview (Liu, 2016). The interviews were then transcribed and analysed using AI-generated code in ATLAS.ti with several modifications

and re-coding. This method helps the researcher to understand more about the issues and topics discussed in the interview. The categories from the generated coding are then used to form the corresponding study theme.

In addition, the researcher also used word cloud analysis and code networks to help categorize and review the content of the interview. The word cloud is a method to develop the cloud of the most frequent wording used in the qualitative interview to provide an initial glimpse into what exactly the theme is intended by the participants (Nowell, 2017). For this purpose, ICT technopreneurs were selected as the study sample. Code networks also help researcher to provide a comprehensive picture of the interaction between themes and code. Only then the researcher would be able to make a holistic interpretation. By using both the theme and code network allows researcher to better understand the content of interviews and can help researcher to find patterns of relationships between the codes more clearly and make more appropriate interpretations thereafter.

#### 4.1 Word cloud analysis on tacit knowledge transfer

The word cloud analysis is used to identify the main and categories at the preliminary stage of analysis. Below is the outcome from word cloud analysis: -



Figure 1: Word Cloud Image for the development of the main and sub-theme and in tacit knowledge transfer

From the generated word cloud image, the researcher then uses the frequency data (6 and above) to interpret the image to the main theme and categories. The main theme is the knowledge transfer which indicates the precedence needs to build a culture of knowledge in the ICT based organization through various activities and initiatives (Davidavičiene, 2020). The goals are mainly to enrich individuals with knowledge for continuous productivity, performance, and innovation (Khallouk, 2022; Li, 2011) gained through collaborative alliances among staff members, while creating a conducive and pleasant working atmosphere. The following is an interpretation of the results of the word cloud and the resulting co-occurrence events as shown below:-

Table 2 : Main theme and sub-theme of tacit knowledge transfer from Word Cloud analysis

Theme	Categories	Thematic Interpretation
Knowledge Transfer	Team collaboration	An entrepreneur builds collaborative culture of knowledge between

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	individuals which helps in sharing the diverse knowledge and experience. The activities such as brainstorming and regular meeting able to connect the knowledge gaps among peer team members.
Mentorship and Guidance	Technopreneurs creates mentorship programmes that able to provide the opportunities to the junior team members to learn from the experience seniors. The more senior team members would be able to provide the necessary support and assistance and guide them through daily routine and important decision making processes.
Learning and development	Technopreneurs continuously invest in the training programmes, seminars, workshops and other related trainings that can facilitate the team members to obtain the required knowledge and enhance their existing skills.
Facilitation	An entrepreneur facilitates the conducive and innovative work culture by encouraging the team members to share, discuss and deliberate the ideas and creative solutions.

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From this word cloud analysis, researcher then used a method of co-occurrence network between tacit knowledge transfer and technopreneural sustainable success factors to identify the most important factors from the generated codes in order to intensify the success of their ICT business.

#### 4.2 Co-occurrence Themes and Codes

By using the frequency methods in Atlas.ti to analyse the collected data and identify the frequency of code, researcher then develops a concept framework from systematically arranged codes. The following is a table of codes that have been compiled to see how both tacit knowledge transfer and success factors and co-occurrences interact as follows:

Table 3 : General and sub-theme, codes and co-occurrence illustrating how tacit knowledge can be transferred

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Main Theme	Interview questions for tacit knowledge transfer	Codes	Co-occurrence
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Knowledge Transfer	How do you transfer your hidden (tacit) knowledge to others in your organization?	Team Building Openness Support Inclusion Knowledge Sharing Job rotation Organizational learning Documentation Encouragement	Continuous learning, training and development  Networking  Leadership  Collaboration  Mentorship
	What are the key factors that have contributed to your success as technopreneur?	Market analysis Motivation Investment Goal setting Self-regulation Contracts Reputation Competitive Trust Adaptability Innovation Managing resources Planning Risk taking Market research Business strategy Loyal customer base Market access Business scaling Customer satisfaction Positive Culture Growth mindset	

### 4.3 Co-occurrence analysis

The concept of co-occurrence in qualitative study refers to a situation when two related concepts or events appear together (Scharp, 2021). In the context of tacit knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial sustainable success among technopreneurs, this co-occurrence relates the two concepts firmly and is very strategic in a corresponding relationship. The following is a diagram that shows the network between co-occurrence that exists between tacit knowledge transfer and also entrepreneurial sustainable success factors:

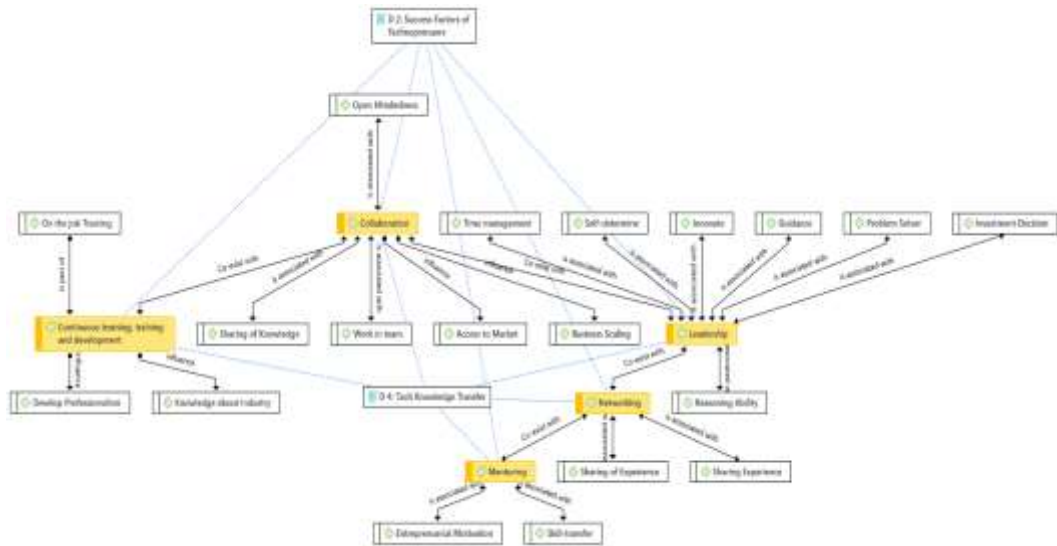


Figure 2 : Co-occurrence network between tacit knowledge transfer and technopreneurs sustainable success factor

### 4.3.1 Continuous learning, training and development

Technopreneurs need to transfer their tacit knowledge through continuous learning, training, and resource development to ensure the organization sustainability. Tacit knowledge is a knowledge that cannot be expressed orally or written; therefore it depends on the efforts to share experience, knowledge and developing mutual understanding with their organization’s members (Caballero-Anthony, 2021; Dehghani, 2020). Case 1. "I enhance my knowledge by conducting workshops and training sessions on an ongoing basis where my team can learn from my experience directly. This allows for a hands-on learning approach" ... in tacit knowledge transfer.

Through learning and training, technopreneurs articulate their tacit knowledge to members of the organization's team. As team members learn, they can develop their skills and knowledge in areas that have been tested and validated by technopreneur. Learning and training also help in growing a work culture and forming a common mindset in the organization.

### 4.3.2 Networking

To build tacit knowledge, technopreneurs should develop a strong industry and mentoring networks. Industry networking allows entrepreneurs to gain access to knowledge resources and opportunities in the industry (Kondo, 2005), while a network of mentors allows them to obtain advice from experts and successful entrepreneurs in the same field. Case 2. "Through a network of mentors and entrepreneurs, it has helped me gain valuable insights and perspectives, which have contributed to my success" ... in technopreneur success.

Building a mentor-mentee strategy in the ICT industry allows entrepreneurs to gain tacit knowledge from more experienced people and work in the same industry. The mentor-mentee relationship is especially important in helping entrepreneurs understand how operations, strategies, innovations and businesses are run (Dayasindhu, 2022). In other words, mentors have extensive experience and abundant knowledge resources that can be channelled to the technopreneurs’ learning process.

### 4.3.3 Leadership

Technopreneurs need to exhibit examples to encourage the transfer of tacit knowledge among team members in the organization. It can be done through effective communication



and professional relationships. Case 9. "I make sure that I myself am ready for consultation, guidance and advice when team members need help. This helps to transfer tacit knowledge directly and efficiently" ... in tacit knowledge transfer. Case 4. "Investing in my team by providing them with the necessary resources and training is essential in achieving success in this industry" ... in technopreneur success.

In addition, technopreneurs should cultivate continuous learning culture and resource development opportunities to ensure the sustainability and performance of the organization (Xie et al., 2022). These opportunities should be well planned to ensure that members of the organization's team could hone their skills and knowledge. Technopreneurs should strongly support for planning and implementing appropriate learning and resource development programs to build and transfer tacit knowledge to their team members.

#### 4.3.4 Collaboration

Collaboration between technopreneurs, staff members and other industry players is particularly important to acquire and develop tacit knowledge (Mingxing et al., 2020). Through this collaboration, technopreneurs can deepen their understanding of the industry and learn the latest techniques and strategies that help the organizations' operational and growth strategies, so that their employees become more competent and well-verse, for instance, industry contextual understanding, network and relationship buildings and problem-solving skills. Case 2. "I often share my experiences and thoughts through in-depth discussions during team meetings. This helps build a culture of knowledge sharing within the organization" ... in tacit knowledge transfer. Case 13. "Working with businesses and other industry players has enabled me to grow my business and explore new markets" ... in technopreneur success.

Collaboration with other industry players can open the door to new networks and more business opportunities (Riosvelasco-Monroy, 2022). When technopreneurs and other industry players continuously share different views and perspective of different ideas among themselves, enabling them to look at their industry from different viewpoints, thus, enabling technopreneurs to expand their tacit knowledge as well as refreshing and updating the existing one.

#### 4.3.5 Mentorship

Mentorship plays a significant role in the process of building tacit knowledge to ensure the long-term performance that leads to a more sustainable business (Ifeoma, 2019; Jamieson et al., 2022). This initiative enables technopreneurs to share the latest experiences and knowledge with their employees, as well as providing an avenue for employees to learn from their leaders on the latest industry strategies or important information to enhance the level of motivation, cooperation and performance of the organization. Case 3. "We implement mentor-mentee coaching programs within our organization, where experienced team members guide and transfer implicit knowledge to more junior colleagues" ... in tacit knowledge transfer.

Mentorship drives business success by offering guidance, knowledge transfer, skill development, networking and relationship building and necessary advisory support to individuals working in the organization. In knowledge transfer, mentors share their experience, expertise, and industry knowledge with mentees, providing them with valuable insights and practical advice. This knowledge transfer can help mentees make informed decisions, avoid common pitfalls, and accelerate their learning curve. For skill development, mentors guide mentees in developing specific skills that are crucial for success in their industry or profession. These skills may include leadership, communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and strategic thinking. Mentorship activities able to help mentees acquire and refine these skills, enabling them to be more

effective in their roles and contribute to business growth. Whereas, in networking and relationship building, mentors introduce mentees to their networks and facilitate valuable connections within the industry. Building a strong network is essential for business success as it opens up opportunities for collaboration, partnerships, and accessing new markets or customers.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Successful ICT technopreneurs demonstrate that they possess tacit knowledge of various important aspects. The importance of tacit knowledge in sustaining the technopreneurial success can be articulated through various means as shown in table 3. It is further strengthened by several tacit transfer activities that integrate with each other as shown in figure 2.

In addition, tacit knowledge could help organizations to face the challenge of a shortage of talented and potential workforce and could even facilitate apprenticeship on leadership programs. Tacit knowledge is an essential element in ensuring the long-term technopreneurs sustainability. Technopreneurs should take the initiative to develop and pass on their tacit knowledge to employees through various initiatives to ensure preservation of long-term sustainable technopreneurs success.

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