More Than an Answer: Information Relationships for Actionable Knowledge
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This research looks at how information relationships in organizations are cultivated, maintained, and used to create actionable knowledge — knowledge that leads to immediate progress on a current project. The research involved two studies, one qualitative and one quantitative, involving 158 managers from one large accounting firm.

Qualitative Study
This study developed concepts related to information relationships and actionable knowledge, based on 40 managers’ descriptions of how they solved complex problems under tight deadlines. Members of the informant group, half men and half women, were responsible for generating pragmatic solutions that could move their client-consultant relationships forward.

The researchers did not assume key sources of information would be people. However, when asked to describe sources of information critical to project success, 85 percent of managers immediately named one or more people. Interviewees were then asked to identify three important individuals and describe how their interactions with them resulted in the creation of actionable knowledge.

Most of the sources named were described as partners in information relationships rather than “experts.” Interviewees revealed that while formal structure influenced their choices (for example, 36 percent of relationships were with hierarchical superiors), informal aspects of relationships were also important. Connections on a personal level (such as education, family, and philosophical outlook) made these relationships feel safer, allowing the managers to take risks or ask dumb questions — qualities that promoted creativity. Ninety-seven percent of sources were described as “willing to engage,” or to think with them rather than dump information on them. These relationships were cultivated and maintained over time. Proactive sharing of information and opportunities, and quality rather than quantity of interactions, were important maintenance behaviours.

Key messages
• Almost all managers (95 percent) interviewed said they benefited from the people they consulted in five ways: 1) solutions (know-what and know-how); 2) referrals; 3) problem reformulation; 4) validation; and 5) legitimation.
• No more than three of these five components of actionable knowledge ever came from the same person, indicating different types of actionable knowledge come from relationships with different attributes.
• Learning is affected by existing knowledge, and by specific relational characteristics and source behaviours, that enhance or hinder one’s ability to learn from another.

From these data, the authors identified five components of actionable knowledge:

1) Solutions: 87 percent of sources offered procedural knowledge that helped turn theory into action. Only 13 percent provided declarative knowledge.

2) Referrals: 70 percent of sources pointed to other people who were also more likely to offer information because of their connection with the source.

3) Problem reformulation: 45 percent of sources were valued for their ability to shape the seeker’s problem, as well as to point out consequences and anticipate issues.

4) Validation: 49 percent of informants said their sources bolstered their confidence and helped them create more persuasive arguments for a case.

5) Legitimation: Legitimation of a proposed approach by sources was valued at important project junctures because it saved research time and sped up the time needed to get agreement.

Relationships for referrals, problem reformulation, and validation were characterized by greater intimacy than those for solutions or legitimation.
Quantitative study
This quantitative research, involving 118 managers, sought to assess how formal and informal attributes of the knowledge seeker, the knowledge source, and the relationship between the two predict the uptake of actionable knowledge. The authors found:

- seeker expertise affects the receipt of referral, problem reformulation, and validation components, particularly when dealing with ill-structured problems;
- perceived source expertise is important in predicting seeker receipt of all components of actionable knowledge except problem reformulation, where tie strength and willingness to engage in problem-solving were most important;
- the source’s willingness to actively think with the seeker helps the seeker assimilate and use new knowledge;
- weak ties are important for solutions, while strong ties matter for problem reformulation and validation, which require effort (such as seeking additional information) on the part of the source; and
- seekers turn to peers only for problem reformulation.

The paper describes its methodological weaknesses and concludes with the wish that future research take a more collective approach to learning. Who learns what from whom, how rapidly, and how faithfully, and how is organizational performance (effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation) affected?

This research offers valuable insights for managers, suggesting the types of advice they should seek and the relationship investments they should make to yield actionable knowledge for themselves personally, and the importance of supporting social networks in their organizations generally.