

THE ART OF KNOWLEDGE SEEKING

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 39

MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP** TO
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN
A TECHNICAL ROLE

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**“If knowledge is not put into
practice, it does not benefit one.”**

Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri

CHAPTER | 39 |

The Art of Knowledge Seeking

**Ensuring currency, comprehensiveness,
and clarity in our knowledge seeking will
secure success.**

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- While knowledge seeking is something most experts do, why aren't we more deliberate about it?
- The key principles underpinning advanced knowledge seeking.
- The importance of diverse information feeds.

THE FIRST EXPERT ROLE in the Expert Knowledge capability is **Knowledge Seeker**. This set of behaviors relates to ensuring that we have the right information, both specialist and non-domain, and that it's comprehensive and current.

An expert's knowledge really is their ticket to the game. Without great knowledge, combined with skills and experience, it's unlikely that we'd be considered experts in our technical field. Ideally, an experienced expert's knowledge should be at the forefront of their field. Master Experts commit

to continuous learning in their domain, the broader industry, and related global trends.

The quality of an expert’s knowledge is judged by three things. The three Cs of knowledge are *currency*, *comprehensiveness* and *clarity*. The behaviors at each level of Expertship for this expert role are described in Figure 39.1.

At immature levels, there’s a danger that the knowledge is tired at best and outdated at worst, without the expert being aware of these facts. Experts who have “always done it this way”, or who have analyzed a problem assuming past solutions will work as well today as they did in the past can often be caught out by rapid changes in information, best practice, and next practice.

In contrast, the Master Expert is constantly worried about not having the latest information, and that’s why this role uses the word *seeker* in its title.

The Master Expert Knowledge Seeker has information flowing to them from a broad range of sources, keeping them up to date on the latest innovations, developments, versions, practices and case studies in their immediate domain and those adjacent to their knowledge area.

*“Currency is assisted by curiosity,
which is another key factor.”*

The Master Expert is always challenging past assumptions, always asking what has changed that we know about, and what might have changed that we don’t know about. They’re intensely curious about trends and how the world, and customers in particular, are changing. Master Experts have wide networks of like-minded experts who share information and sources. They’re always seeking new channels of valuable information. They don’t rest on their laurels. They fidget and fuss over their information sources.

Derailers. Given that many of the experts we’ve worked with consider the breadth and currency of the knowledge they possess to be one of the biggest contributors to their personal brand, there’s probably no greater crime than an expert’s knowledge being outdated. With the increasing speed of change and new ideas and approaches to business, technology and customers, accidentally becoming outdated is now a greater danger than ever. In Figure 39.2, we look at the Knowledge Seeking aspects of a Master Expert’s Knowledge Strategy.

Capability: EXPERT KNOWLEDGE**Expert Role: KNOWLEDGE SEEKER****MASTER
EXPERT**

- Continuously updates existing knowledge from traditional and new domain sources, maintaining very high specialist knowledge currency.
- Continuously challenges existing knowledge assumptions.
- Actively seeks new sources of knowledge from domain and non-domain sources.
- Demonstrates commitment to extending skills and knowledge beyond the edge of existing expertise.
- Models life-long learning across a breadth of topics.

EXPERT

- Ensures knowledge remains immediately current by continuous engagement in professional development activities.
- Actively seeks new sources of knowledge from domain sources.
- Can challenge well-established and accepted assumptions within technical domain.

SPECIALIST

- Ensures knowledge remains current by periodic participation in professional development.
- Relies on well-established and accepted assumptions without challenge.

- Relies on out-of-date knowledge; little time spent on increasing currency.
- Dismisses new sources of knowledge as irrelevant.
- Completely reliant on narrow domain information sources.

DERAILING

FIGURE 39.1: Knowledge Seeker Behaviors

Knowledge Currency

LET'S TAKE A LOOK at what constitutes Master Expert behavior when it comes to information sources and maintaining currency.

Currency is very important. It's about being up to date all the time. This requires experts to seek out new developments in relevant specialized technical fields and in the organization's industry. It's vital that expertise remains current.

Currency is assisted by curiosity, which is another key factor. Knowledge Seeking is an attitude. Curiosity always trumps certainty or knowing. As we know, some people are naturally curious, and others are not. Most experts we meet are curious. They want to know the *why*, not just the *what*. Curiosity can also be developed. Key questions a very curious expert might ask include:

- What are the emerging challenges in my field?
- What innovations are taking place in my field?
- What implications do these developments have for the field?

The Master Expert has a deep thirst for learning. They experience a raging curiosity rather than a complacency that they're already knowledgeable about everything.

Depending on our level of Expertship, we collect valuable information through either a narrowly focused set of information feeds or a very broad and eclectic set of feeds. By *feeds*, we mean channels of information, such as colleagues, suppliers, blogs, podcasts, websites, journals, newsletters, video and other media, experiences and so on. In the expert knowledge strategy model (Figure 39.2), we've listed other obvious categories, such as associations we might be members of, events we might attend, partners we work with, and our past, current and possibly future experiences.

Master Experts have broad, multi-topic, global, internal and external information feeds. As Master Experts, we should constantly be looking for new feeds to inform *next practice* and *future practice*, as these will enable us to make a strategic contribution to our organization.

Knowledge Comprehensiveness

OUR EXPERIENCE OF WORKING with many experts is that they have gradually come to rely on reliable, trusted, comfortable information sources that are mostly within their expert domain.

Capability: EXPERT KNOWLEDGE

An Expert Knowledge Strategy

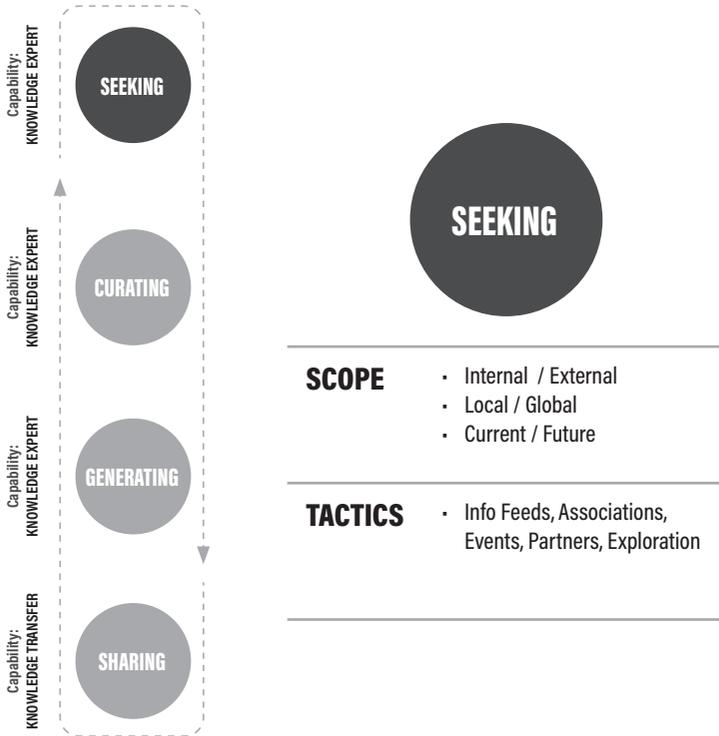


FIGURE 39.2: Knowledge Seeker Strategy

Roger, a very experienced IT specialist, at our prompting, did an analysis of his information sources. He discovered that they almost exclusively covered his two passions: very targeted IT information and music. Roger aspired, however, to spend more time working with executives and influencers outside the IT department on shaping the organization's strategic direction. If he was to be credible, this required that he spend some time looking at the information these executives regularly consumed and relied on.

As a consequence of his audit, he reduced his IT-related information feeds and replaced them with broader business and society feeds that would help him contextualize where his organization was, and where it needed to get to in the future. His list now includes marketing blogs that talk about

customer centricity, a chief digital officer’s newsletter, and various feeds regarding changing consumer behaviors and attitudes.

This means that Roger now has a much more comprehensive breadth of knowledge, giving him insights into how his technical craft can add value to the organization and its customers.

“The balance between mainstream and contrarian is harder to define, but we value it highly.”

Finding the balance between internal and external sources is also important. If we’re an expert in a large organization, it’s tempting to only read the internal communications about the progress of the organization. There’s a lot of this information, but it’s the equivalent of drinking the organization’s Kool-Aid. We’re only getting one view of the world, and it’s often one that paints an over-enthusiastic picture of our organization’s position. We need to know what our competitors are saying about themselves and our organization.

The balance between local and global is a more obvious consideration. What is happening in our backyard is one thing, but understanding what is happening elsewhere, particularly in places where consumers are early adopters of new ideas and technologies, is vitally important. Since so many experts now work in international roles and very large global organizations, this has become essential.

The balance between mainstream and contrarian is harder to define, but we value it highly. Mainstream is the reporting of established norms, processes and mindsets. Contrarian is the reporting of radical and alternative ideas and thinking. As senior experts in organizations, we can’t really afford to be on the bleeding edge in terms of policy or practice. But on the other hand, we can’t afford to be blindsided about the future by only consuming information feeds that tell us what we want to hear.

A Master Expert is keen to discover information feeds that contain content that runs contrary to the accepted view. This provides the expert with balance, as listening to those who have a completely different view to us is helpful. It allows us to understand how others think. It helps us clarify why we think the way we do about issues.

It’s dangerous to only read information streams that strongly focus on one view of an issue. In Australia recently, there was the view, promoted by mainstream media, that property prices couldn’t possibly fall. They did. A small number of expert economists had been predicting the fall for a while.

There are information feeds that focus on climate change being a myth, and there are those that wholeheartedly accept it as a reality. If we only read

one side of the story, we wouldn't be much of an expert. Of course, there may be some we believe are higher quality or more accurate, so we'll give more weight to those sources than others.

The Master Expert has a balanced set of information sources, many of which constantly challenge common thinking. This is a sensible approach to Knowledge Seeking.

There is no absolute right or wrong list of information sources. But there is a right or wrong way to manage them. Regular audits, killing feeds that are no longer relevant, seeking out new feeds that offer different perspectives or thinking, regularly checking in with colleagues about what they're finding most interesting—these are the behaviors of a Master Expert.

“Senior experts focus on information feeds that enable them to see into the future.”

Our objectives are maintaining currency and relevance, as well as achieving breadth and diversity.

In the last decade, many highly successful emergent companies have achieved scale and relevance because they combined a customer need with a new business or value model and clever technology. It's the combination of these things that creates success.

If Roger had continued to only read IT news feeds, he couldn't have become the innovative and creative Master Expert he is today.

Knowledge Clarity

THE TROUBLE WITH INFORMATION feeds is that there are far too many of them, and they're of variable quality.

We encourage the experts we work with to develop real clarity about the variety of information they're consuming. We ask them why they are consuming the information they do, and what they do with it afterward. We talk about knowledge curation in the next chapter.

In the expert knowledge strategy model, we suggest three measures that help ensure the information being consumed is balanced:

- Internal versus external: more junior experts will focus on absorbing all the relevant internal informal. This is also true of more experienced experts who have just joined an organization. Master Experts will have a balance that favors external feeds.
- Local versus global: more junior experts will be concerned with understanding what's going on around them. More senior experts want to know what's going on everywhere.

- Current versus future: more junior experts will focus on current news and developments. More senior experts will focus on information feeds that enable them to see into the future.

In addition to knowing *what* information we're consuming and *why*, knowledge clarity also requires us to have clarity about *how* we consume it. Are we consuming information with a high degree of curiosity? Do we want to know why things are developing as they are, and what it means for our organization, our job, our craft and our customers? This type of active reading helps us to get the most value out of our knowledge seeking.

Finding Time to Knowledge Seek When We're Flat-Out

THE POINT OF HAVING a strategy is that we're being deliberate about gathering knowledge and putting it to use. But most experts we work with tell us they're already extremely busy, so finding time to consume more new information is difficult.

The development suggestions below offer some guidance, but we'd also suggest you consider applying some of these principles:

- Don't overwhelm your knowledge gathering with multiple information feeds on the same topics. Cull your list down to one or two trusted sources and one contrarian view.
- Schedule your consumption of these feeds. Make them part of your everyday work. One of the authors consumes new information by listening to audiobooks on the long drives he has to take for work. The other author makes lunchtime his time to catch up on economic and learning feeds.
- Use one of the many great digital tools that now exist for aggregating and collecting content so that the hard work is done for you.

TAKING ACTION

Growing Our Knowledge Seeking Skills

IF THIS IS AN expert role in which you believe you could add greater value, here are some high-level suggestions for actions to take:

▶ AUDIT CURRENT KNOWLEDGE SOURCES

- When did you last do a review of your reading habits and your most trusted information sources? If it was a while ago, doing a review is always worthwhile. Here are some critical questions we might like to ask ourselves:
- Have any of my long-term trusted information sources been superseded by more up-to-date information feeds?
- Do my information sources reflect the future direction of the organization, or the past?
- Are they sufficiently global in scope?
- Have new thought leaders emerged that I should be following (even if I disagree with their point of view)?
- Do my information sources reflect a huge technical bias, or are they broad enough to include reading about my organization, its rivals, and the industry it operates in?

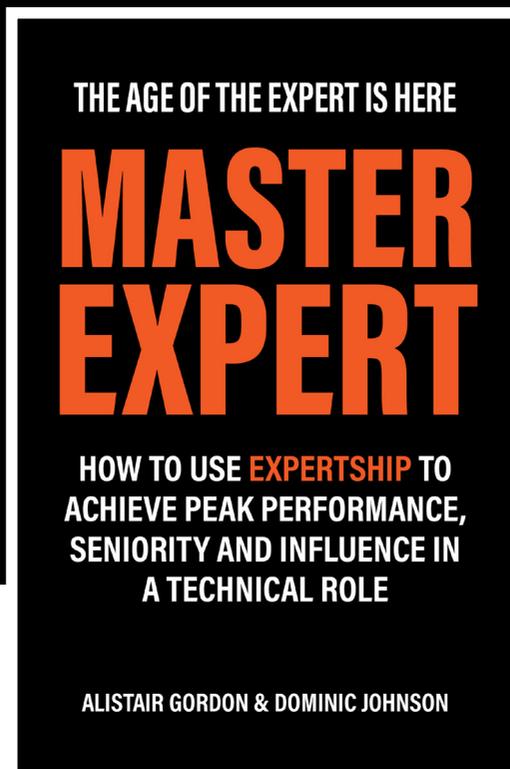
▶ CHALLENGE CORE BELIEFS ABOUT BEST PRACTICE AND EXPLORE NEXT PRACTICE

We all use assumptions to underpin our opinions, policies and approaches to the expert work we do, but there's a risk that changing market dynamics or indeed customer needs will render these assumptions obsolete, or only partially relevant. Here are some critical questions we might ask ourselves:

- When did I last objectively document my evidence-based assumptions about best practice?
- When did I last objectively challenge these assumptions?
- When did I last explore alternative assumptions, processes and approaches?
- What new approaches are likely to supersede the ones I'm using now?

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