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# Tacit knowledge transfer from a master to an apprentice among hairdressers

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the factors affecting tacit knowledge transfer from a master to an apprentice in the informal sector among hairdressers in Ghana.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study was used as the research design. Convenient sampling technique was used to select 47 master hairdressers. Semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection. Data were analysed using the thematic technique.

**Findings** – The study found that apprenticeship fee, fear of competition, delegation reasons, joy and pride of mentorship, apprentices' attitude and time, to be significant factors influencing tacit knowledge transfer from a master to an apprentice. It was also evident that time spent with master as he/she performs or works is crucial to learning as most of the learning is through socializing with the master.

**Research limitations/implications** – The main limitation of the study is the use of the convenient sampling technique in choosing the participants. The results of this study, if it has to be generalised to all hairdressers in Ghana, it may have to be done with caution since the participants were not drawn from a pool of all master hairdressers in Ghana.

**Practical implications** – The paper provides what apprentices must do to acquire the tacit knowledge of master hairdressers.

**Originality/value** – This paper focuses on the holder of tacit knowledge (master hairdressers) and reveals their motivations to transfer or hoard their tacit knowledge.

**Keywords** Knowledge transfer, Ghana, Tacit knowledge

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Knowledge is an essential resource for sustainable economic growth and productivity. Professionals and academicians have noted knowledge as a key source of competitive advantage for organisations (Grant, 1997). This is due to its inimitable and non-substitutable nature (Kreiner, 2002).

Though studies investigating knowledge transfer abounds (Lahti and Beyerlein, 2000; Jacob and Ebrahimipur, 2001; Foos *et al.*, 2006), limited studies have investigated knowledge transfer in apprenticeship. Extant literature that can be said to have been on apprenticeship have stuffed information on the aims, types, nature, methods of training and the recipients of the knowledge, the apprentice (see Donkor, 2012; Jaarsma *et al.*, 2011; Ridzwan and Ruhizan, 2015; Hawkins, 2008), but very little study has been done on the specific case of the holder of the knowledge (in this case master hairdressers). Apprenticeship is a period of knowledge impartation; the knowledge acquired by master is transmitted to the apprentice over a period of time. However, the quality of knowledge passed on to an apprentice often depended on the knowledge set of the master craftsperson and his/her willingness to pass on the knowledge (COTVET, 2016).

It is noted that not all the manner or type of knowledge can be easily transmitted. Tacit knowledge by its nature is difficult to transfer (Narteh, 2008) as it is highly embodied in

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human skills (Polanyi, 1967). Kreiner (2002) contends that due to the level of uncertainty that is associated with tacit knowledge, it is hardly transferred. The more valuable the tacit knowledge, the less likely the individual, team or organisation will want to lose it or transfer it out (Sternberg *et al.*, 1995). Therefore, it can be argued that knowledge transfer is a planned behaviour. This study seeks to fill this lacuna by focusing on masters; the study investigates the determinants of tacit knowledge transfer from a master to an apprentice in the informal sector among hairdressers in using the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as the theoretical lens.

## 2. Hairdressing in the informal sector of Ghana

Hairdressing thrives remarkably among the various trades, and it is one of the modern and important occupations for women in Ghana. In general, there are no entry requirements such as general school education. As a result, hairdressing apprenticeship has worked as one of the major recourses for women with basic education these days (Oda, 2005). The general features of hairdressing in Ghana have been documented (see Oda, 2005; Essah, 2008). In Essah's PhD thesis "Fashioning the nation: Hairdressing, professionalism and the performance of gender in Ghana, 1900-2006" she noted, within most beauty salons, apprentices are the largest category of beauty care providers. Apprentices could serve as the yardstick that measured the performance of beauty salons because of the visual impression that they made on observers. Apprentices wear uniform clothing that was sewn from the same fabric and sometimes have the same style. The number of apprentices in a beauty salon make observers deem the madam highly skilled or knowledgeable in providing beauty care. Parents and guardians sent their children and wards for training at beauty salons that could provide excellent services. Aside the "apprenticeship fee", all potential apprentices provide a crate of minerals and about \$8.6 as *anbantem sika* ("late comer's fee"). The master shares this money and drink among all the hairdressers in the beauty salon according to seniority (Essah, 2008).

According to Essah (2008), a new apprentice learns the trade by first ensuring that the beauty salon was always clean and neat, and it has water for washing clients' hair. Essah's finding is confirmed by Oda (2005) where he noted that some salons give a graduation examination to their apprentices. When apprentices pass, people are invited to hold a graduation ceremony. Then, a testimonial is issued from the salon. Thus, upon the end of the apprenticeship period, the master sets an examination day when the apprentice would bring her own model to demonstrate that she knows how to provide a perm or braids. The examination day normally also doubles as the graduation day. However, graduation day could be delayed if the apprentice had not paid all of her "apprenticeship fee". A master could agree that the apprentice would graduate and then work at the salon for a few months without pay in lieu of the rest of her fee (Essah, 2008). In her study, Essah (2008) noted that, after graduation, graduates do get employment in hotels and different beauty salons as long as they are able to demonstrate their skills. Oda (2005), on the other hand, observed that most of them open their own salons and operate as masters.

## 3. Knowledge transfer in apprenticeship

Apprenticeship is the approach used to conveying specialized knowledge to a new generation of practitioners. It is a means of learning things that cannot be easily communicated by conventional means. Apprenticeship is used in contexts that involve knowledge to be acquired through long-term observation and experience (Coy, 1989). Through this process the apprentices are transformed to masters (experts).

Knowledge transfer involves either actively communicating to others what one knows or actively consulting others in order to learn what they know (Van den Hoof and De Ridder, 2004). It is a process of exchange of either of the two dimensions of knowledge, explicit or