Chapter 45
Social Networking and Knowledge Sharing in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing in organizational context is facilitated by communicative process affected by varied social dynamics. It can be a difficult process in case of distributed organizations as employees may not be aware of the right source of getting advice and expertise. In such a scenario, social networking tools provide the required functionality for such sharing and lead to better social ties among knowledge providers and seekers across the organization. The chapter brings out some factors that affect knowledge-sharing behavior in the context of organizations using social networking tools as a communicative media.

INTRODUCTION

Employees working in an organization have both explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is easier to document and share than tacit knowledge which stems from practical and experiential understanding. Solutions to contemporary business problems can be achieved by utilizing the available expertise spanning across different functional areas of an organization (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Staying connected helps in advancing the understanding about various functional domains and helps in generating a multi-perspective outlook for tackling any issue. One such way of staying connected can be achieved by using social networking tools within the organizational boundaries. Yammer, Salesforce Chatter, Microsoft Sharepoint online are a few examples of collaborative and social tools used in enterprises. Enterprise wide social networking can help in connecting people from different backgrounds and domains making it easier to transfer knowledge to wider audiences (Riemer & Scifleet, 2012). The present chapter draws from extant literature to highlight the usefulness of social networking for knowledge sharing purposes along with discussing the relevant factors and adoption issues.

BACKGROUND

In its simplest form, social networking can be described as the use of internet technology to create and share user generated content by a web of people connected with each other online. Sophia van Zyl (2009) defines social networking as "applications or websites that support the maintenance of personal relationships, the discovery of potential relationships and should aid in the conversion of potential ties into weak and strong ties, by utilizing emergent Web 2.0 technologies." Social networking allows people to make connections, join groups of their interest, contribute information and discuss issues of relevance. All this is accomplished through various modes such as online communities, blogs, discussion forums and other online collaborative tools.

Enterprise Social Media

An emerging trend in the use of online collaborative tools in organizational context is Enterprise Social Media (ESM). Leonardi et al. (2013) define enterprise social media (ESM) as "web-based platforms that allow workers to communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organization; explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; post, edit, sort text and files linked to themselves or others; view the messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organization at any time of their choosing." ESM is an effective platform for connecting people across functional domains and making visible the information shared with a wider audience. Similar to popular social platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, ESM platforms may vary in the functionality offered and features supported but primarily they serve similar inherent purpose of bringing people together facilitating information flow and knowledge conversations, crowd source solutions across multiple domains, share relevant expertise and foster collaboration(Riemer & Scifleet, 2012).

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Nature of Knowledge

Every organization wants its employees to share their knowledge with their co-workers as it will eventually benefit the organization in terms of improved performance. Knowledge exists in explicit and tacit forms. While explicit knowledge is easier to communicate and acquire, tacit knowledge is acquired by way of practice and encompasses skills and experiences held by people. It is difficult to document and explicate tacit knowledge as it is embedded in action and involves commitment (Nonaka, 1994). Such knowledge is helpful when there is a specific problem to be solved. The knowledge seeker approaches the potential knowledge provider with the problem and a solution can be reached by consensus after considering the circumstantial issues and making appropriate judgments. Creative solutions can be achieved by mutual knowledge sharing leading to enhanced creative performance when employees search information, share and co-create more information by way of interactions and discussions thereby adding to existing knowledge base of discussants (Sigala & Chalkati, 2015).

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