Interpersonal Trust in Online Partnerships: The Challenge of Representation

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, trust is treated as a form of tacit knowledge that can be made explicit to some extent by means of knowledge management techniques such as codification and pattern matching. The authors explore the issue of representing interpersonal trust by means of a case study. This describes the development of an online platform to support partnership among small firms where remoteness, and/or lack of time, preclude the long-term build-up of trusting relationships. The authors argue that in such a situation, infrastructure and process may be designed to support trustful interaction. They review a number of empirical studies of interpersonal trust that suggest that judgments about trust in the early stages of the formation of partnerships are indicative of relationship quality in subsequent stages. Such assessments may be seen as
“representations” of trust. A specification to support such assessment is described.

INTRODUCTION

Why bother with the problem of representing trust? For many people, trust is an emotion that is not, by definition, amenable to representation. For this reason, they will argue, attempts to design online infrastructure to support the formation and maintenance of trust for commercial partnerships are misplaced. This chapter takes a different position. Trust is treated as a form of tacit knowledge that can be made explicit to some extent by means of knowledge management techniques such as codification and pattern matching. The authors explore the issues of interpersonal trust by means of a case study of partnerships among small firms where remoteness, and/or lack of time, preclude the long-term build-up of trusting relationships. These conditions are characteristic of many e-commerce transactions. We argue that far from being trust-free, such transactions require as much awareness of trust as traditional situations, and that infrastructure and process may be designed to support trustful interaction. In the text that follows, we review a number of studies of interpersonal trust, and extract an argument from these for the specification of an online platform for partnering that may allow trust to be assessed in the early stages of the formation of partnerships. Readers who require a more comprehensive review of trust studies are referred to the chapter by Marsh and Dibben (2003).

INTERPERSONAL TRUST

A large body of work has explored organizational trust. (An exemplary monograph has been edited by Tyler and Kramer, 1996.) There is, thus, no single definition of trust. Marsh (1994) suggests that this lack of definition has led to confusion about the concept, despite the fact that the concept is seemingly so basic. This view is also echoed by Dibben (2000), who states that the everyday use of the term “has brought about confusion as to what the true meaning is” (p. 6). This confusion may have arisen because of the range of constructs that are encompassed by the concept and the numerous fields in which the concept is widely used, such as organizational behavior, philosophy and computer science. The chapter does not attempt to derive a high level framework from this broad corpus. It takes a narrower, low-level path through the more restricted subset of material on situated, interpersonal, and swift trust.
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