Would You Share?  
Examining Knowledge Type and Communication Channel for Knowledge Sharing Within and Across the Organizational Boundary

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ABSTRACT

Advances in computer-mediated communication technologies have increased the variety of choices individuals have when sharing knowledge both within and across organizational boundaries. This paper extends prior research by comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated communication channels (email, online communities, and knowledge repositories/wikis) for different knowledge types (computer program and expertise) in intra- and inter-organizational knowledge sharing contexts. Using vignettes, this study determines whether individuals adjust their knowledge sharing behaviors based on the different knowledge types, communication channels, and boundary conditions. Results suggest individuals are more likely to share expertise intra-organizationally via face-to-face and share a computer program intra-organizationally via knowledge repositories/wikis. Also, results suggest individuals are more likely to share expertise or a computer program inter-organizationally via face-to-face.

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication, Email, Face-to-Face, Knowledge Repository, Knowledge Sharing, Knowledge Type, Online Community, Vignette, Wikis

INTRODUCTION

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have created opportunities for workers to choose how they engage in knowledge sharing. Several of these technologies enable knowledge sharing regardless of time, location, and personal history (Constant et al., 1996; Rice et al., 2000; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Organizations are increasingly leveraging ICTs to help workers reach beyond the traditional face-to-face (F2F) environments to support intra-organizational knowledge sharing. Additionally, ICTs create opportunities to share knowledge across organizational boundaries. For example, Web 2.0 environments such as electronic knowledge repositories and wikis (KRs/Wikis) provide an opportunity for col-
laborative knowledge sharing. Consequently, research understanding how employees share knowledge using ICTs within and across the organizational boundary is needed.

Knowledge sharing occurs when an information provider willingly contributes knowledge to an information seeker when requested (Constant et al., 1994; Ford & Staples, 2008; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001; Li, 2009). Prior research on knowledge management has demonstrated that individuals consider a variety of factors when choosing to share their knowledge (Ford & Staples, 2008). For example, an individual shares based on individual motivations (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), potential direct and indirect benefits or rewards (Ford & Staples 2008; Kankanhalli et al., 2005), costs of contribution in terms of codification and loss of personal value/relevance (Ford & Staples, 2008; Thorn & Connolly, 1987), perceptions of ownership and knowledge type (Constant et al., 1994; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001), trust (Jarvenpaa et al., 2004; Nicolaou & McKnight, 2006), relational ties (Constant et al., 1996; Levin et al., 2006), sharing context (Santoro & Saparito, 2006), and sharing culture (Yu et al., 2010). This research demonstrates that individuals consider to be important the manner with which they will share knowledge, the type of knowledge they are willing to share, and the contextual factors that surround the request for knowledge.

So far, research examining the combination of knowledge type and the specific communication channel, and how this combination impacts an individual’s decision to share knowledge, has not been fully examined. Research to date has focused on knowledge sharing in a single exchange environment e.g., email (Constant et al., 1996), online community (Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2000), or electronic knowledge repository (Kankanhalli et al., 2005). As a result, prior empirical research does not present a clear explanation of knowledge sharing within a real organizational context where employees have access to a variety of choices regarding the communication channels available.

Additionally, research on knowledge sharing has mainly focused on knowledge sharing in the intra-organizational knowledge sharing context (Constant et al., 1994; Kankanhalli et al., 2005). Considerably less is known about how individuals engage in inter-organizational knowledge sharing. With computer-mediated communication CMC, it is just as easy to share knowledge electronically with a coworker in the next cubicle as it is with someone halfway across the globe. Online communities and open knowledge repositories such as the Wikipedia support the open sharing of knowledge regardless of personal history or shared organizational ties.

The purpose of this research is to address these gaps in the literature by examining the following research questions. First, are individuals more likely to use specific communication channels to share certain types of knowledge, and second, under what conditions are individuals willing to share knowledge across organizational boundaries?

This study examines an individual’s likelihood of sharing knowledge based on the type of knowledge requested (tacit or explicit), the channel of communication (F2F or CMC) and the sharing context (intra-organizational versus inter-organizational). The next section presents the theoretical framework based on social exchange that is used to predict knowledge sharing in F2F and CMC environments, comparing the different costs/benefits associated with each type of exchange. Hypotheses are proposed and tested using data gathered via a case-based vignette methodology using graduate students from a large, southeastern university. The paper concludes with a discussion of the important theoretical and practical contributions, limitations and directions for future research.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE

Social exchange theory provides a theoretical foundation for examining knowledge exchange. Social exchange theory focuses on describing socially related behaviors as a form of economic exchange (Blau, 1964). In traditional
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