Chapter 2
Knowledge Sharing in the Age of Web 2.0:
A Social Capital Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 tools are more and more prevalent in organizational life, and this chapter identifies their multiple influences on knowledge sharing practices, as well as the main challenges of the social turn in knowledge sharing. Indeed, it is argued that social capital, a key concept from social sciences that recognizes the benefits practice derived from connections between people, also plays a role in the context of renewed knowledge sharing practices (i.e. based on Web 2.0 technologies). Therefore, this chapter provides an analysis of the influence of social capital in leveraging knowledge sharing in a Web 2.0 context. Finally, using secondary data, this research details a specific case to illustrate how employees can benefit from new forms of knowledge sharing that rely on interactive tools and their social capital.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management (KM) has become of paramount importance for most companies as they progress from the industrial to the informational age. Growing interest in KM resulted from both the conceptualization of knowledge as a source of competitive advantage and the evolution of information systems during the 1990s. Accordingly, KM has progressed through several development phases, overcome several barriers, and arrived at using Web 2.0 tools that reflect the evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). Knowledge management encompasses several processes, including knowledge creation, diffusion, and integration, though knowledge sharing appears particularly relevant and critical to strategic aspects of business life such as

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project management, innovation or new product development. In a context of technological evolution, knowledge sharing also confronts several challenges:

The tricky part isn't creating web sites to bridge distance and time zones, though they help, but finding ways to motivate proud, skilled professionals to share expertise and to cooperate to advance the frontiers of knowledge for the benefit of the shareholders and society (Wessel, 2005).

That is, knowledge sharing is a matter of both technological tools and human interactions. Thus, the notion of social capital has emerged as a promising concept to understand knowledge sharing practices.

This chapter aims to understand how social capital influences knowledge sharing in a Web 2.0 context and to analyze interactions between social capital and Web 2.0 tools as means to leverage knowledge sharing. Accordingly, the first part of this chapter is dedicated to defining and gaining an understanding of knowledge sharing 2.0 (i.e. knowledge sharing in a Web 2.0 environment). Then, we define social capital and propose that it could be useful as a means to understand knowledge sharing practices based on Web 2.0 tools. Finally, we illustrate our findings with the experience of a French firm, Schlumberger. Thus we derive main issues, managerial implications, and direction for further research from our findings.

RENEWING KNOWLEDGE SHARING THROUGH WEB 2.0 TOOLS

The Stakes of Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge distribution across space and time is crucial to ensure the value and development of firms' activities. Such a distribution of knowledge is possible through knowledge sharing within companies, defined as the idea that:

Knowledge, no matter how intangible or fuzzy, is capable of being disseminated, transferred, diffused, shared and distributed within and between organization, communities of practices and departments (Kalling & Styhre, 2003, p.57).

The Importance of Knowledge Sharing

The results from OECD surveys in Canada, Denmark, and Germany show that the primary goal and motivation for implementing knowledge management practices is to facilitate knowledge sharing. For example, 91% of German companies claimed to use knowledge management because they expected to speed up and improve their knowledge transfer. Other benefits included avoiding the same mistakes and preventing the reinvention of the wheel (OECD, 2004).

Knowledge sharing largely depends on the intrinsic characteristics of the focal knowledge, such as its level of codifiability, degree of dispersion, contextualization, and accuracy. Codifiable knowledge may be explicit or tacit, though tacit knowledge is more than difficult to transfer. More explicit knowledge is easier for people to share or diffuse. By its very nature, knowledge is distributed across the organization, so knowledge sharing must overcome scattering and knowledge managers must develop tools to share knowledge in an efficient manner. Despite its benefits, knowledge sharing is often one of the most difficult steps to achieve in knowledge management, due to its stickiness (Szulanski, 1996, 2000) or given its embeddedness within individuals or contexts.

The role of information systems as means to overcome the difficulties in achieving knowledge sharing is evident (*e.g. MIS Quarterly, Special Issue on Information Technologies and Knowledge Management*, vol. 29, n°2, 2005). Many organizations have implemented ICT to provide technical support for knowledge sharing (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Yet the use of ICT in knowledge sharing remains controversial because such support may not be obvious, and

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