

Chapter 69

The Influence of Individual Characteristics on Knowledge Sharing Practices, Enablers, and Barriers in a Project Management Context

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge management (KM) literature in general is short on field evidence concerning knowledge sharing (KS) practices in project management settings, where knowledge occupies a central place. In addition, research on KS enablers and barriers has largely overlooked the fact that individual characteristics may influence the choice to share knowledge. This research explored departmental KS practices, enablers and barriers at a Middle-Eastern project management company. It also investigated the influence of a number of individual characteristics on KS, enablers and barriers. The findings confirm that Knowledge is partially shared within departments, and the employees have varying views on KS enablers and barriers. Although many do not perceive organizational enablers as catalysts for KS, they somewhat believe that the information technology (IT) enablers do facilitate KS. The employees, however, do not believe that the identified individual, organizational and IT barriers hinder KS. In addition, gender, age, department type and job type have varying effects on the perceived KS practices, organizational enablers, and IT enablers and barriers. These findings and their implications are further discussed in the paper.

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INTRODUCTION

Project management generates a large body of knowledge that can be shared and reused across projects. General knowledge associated with previous successes and failures, services, customers and products are all resources that can produce a long-term and sustained competitive advantage for project management companies. Whetherill et al. (2002) assert the importance of knowledge management (KM) as a means of identifying and exploiting corporate and individual knowledge assets in the area of project management.

Project management performance is improved when employees effectively use the best practices and communicate lessons learned, their experiences, and various insights (von Krogh, 2002). Knowledge sharing (KS) ensures that information is made available and is distributed within or across organizational boundaries (Grant, 1996). The value of KS is associated with the fact that organizational knowledge is unique and organizational performance can be improved through sharing such tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). KS, however, is not easily achieved as it strongly depends on the setting, beliefs, and actions of the individuals involved (Lilleoere and Hansen, 2011).

Research on KS enablers and barriers has largely overlooked the fact that individual characteristics may influence the choice to share knowledge (Connelly and Kelloway, 2003). The need to include individual characteristics in future KS research has been recently underlined (Lin, 2007; Matsuo and Easterby-Smith, 2008; Tohidinia and Mosakhani, 2010; Al-Zu'bi, 2011). In addition, the KM literature in general is short on field evidence concerning KS practices in project management settings where knowledge occupies a central place.

This research investigated the effect of gender, age, tenure, education level, department type, and job type on KS practices, enablers, and barriers in a Middle-Eastern project management company.

In addition to providing empirical evidence that should guide future efforts aimed at enhancing KS practices in the said company, the findings of this research also contribute to the growing body of empirical KM and KS research, particularly in project management.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge Sharing (KS)

Knowledge is essential for managing projects. KS is the fundamental means through which the members of an organization can contribute to knowledge acquisition, innovation, and ultimately an increase in competitiveness. KS allows organizations to exploit and capitalize on knowledge-based resources, build on past experiences, respond quickly to problems that have been encountered before, develop new ideas and insights, and avoid reinventing the wheel or repeating past mistakes (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002; Cyr and Choo, 2010).

KS practices facilitate knowledge diffusion and individual learning within organizations. The common strategy for knowledge transfer between projects is to capture "lessons learned." It is important to reuse experience and apply lessons learned to future projects, and that good preparation of work contributes substantially to the success of the execution phase. In managing a project, individuals may also share the knowledge required for choosing subcontractors and suppliers, decision making on bids, evaluating tender documents, and understanding construction technologies and methods (Fong and Chu, 2006). However, cross-project knowledge transfer may fail as knowledge captured from one project is typically not used by others in other projects. Project members are not expected to use knowledge captured from past projects if they think that this knowledge is not useful and/or they are not aware of its existence (Newell et al., 2006).

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