

Impediments for Knowledge Sharing in Professional Service Firms

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INTRODUCTION

Professional service firms (PSFs), where professionals (consultants, lawyers, accountants, tax advisors, etc.) work, are interested in knowledge management, because their businesses are heavily dependent on the knowledge of their employees. A core asset is their ability to solve complex problems through creative and innovative solutions, and the basis for this is their employees' knowledge. The "product" that PSFs offer their clients is knowledge (Kay, 2002; Ofek & Sarvary, 2001; Chait, 1999).

Sharing knowledge between colleagues improves the economical benefits a firm can realize from the knowledge of employees. This is especially true for PSFs (Huang, 1998; Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996), where broad ranges of knowledge must be kept to provide intellectual services, and real-life experiences with certain questions and situations are an important asset. The organizations and its members are spread over various offices across the country or the world. The necessity for sharing grows, because the network of professionals in most cases can offer significantly better professional advice than any individual. "We sell knowledge ... the most valuable thing we can offer is the collective, institutional knowledge of our firm ..." (Roger Siboni, KPMG executive, cit. in Alavi, 1997, p. 1). Working together openly without holding back or protecting vital pieces of knowledge will result in more productivity and innovation than could be reached individually.

BACKGROUND

No professional is denying the worth of using working documents and materials produced by others. All PSFs are trying to set up collections of knowledge acquired in projects in order to share it and conserve it for reuse. Knowledge databases can address what is sometimes called the traditional weakness of PSF: "... narrow specialists who see only their own solutions, self-centered egoists unwilling or unable to collaborate with colleagues" (Liedtka et al., 1997, p. 58). Many authors signal that sharing knowledge seems to be "unnatural" (Quinn,

Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996; Barua & Ravindran, 1996; Holloway, 2000).

However, attempts to use knowledge databases often fail. Only a few databases are accepted as up to date. The special fields of expertise are covered only in fragments. The access is laborious and uncomfortable. Heterogeneous sources (text, internal and external databases, journals, books, comments, codes of law, and so forth) cannot be integrated. The lack of actuality and completeness causes quality risks if dealt with thoughtlessly and if unreflected upon.

People issues are meant to be critical for successful knowledge sharing. According to Ruggles (1998), "In fact, if the people issues do not arise, the effort underway is probably not knowledge management. If technology solves the problem, yours was not a knowledge problem" (p. 88). Therefore, we analyze the reasons why knowledge sharing needs dedicated efforts and describe possible actions to foster knowledge sharing. Through our research (Disterer, 2000, 2001, 2002a) and analyses drawn from literature, we categorize and discuss the various impediments encountered by people sharing knowledge (see Figure 1). There are some empirical results that confirm these impediments (APQC, 1996; Ruggles, 1998; KPMG, 2003; Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001). Then we show various approaches to overcome these impediments.

IMPEDIMENTS TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Loss of Power

Knowledge can be used to take action and to enforce spheres of influence. Passing knowledge to colleagues might grant some of these potentials. Those who do not have this knowledge are deprived of the capacity to act or to influence. That applies for knowledge about customers, competitors, suppliers, procedures, recipes, methods, formulas, etc. In this sense, someone who passes on knowledge to a colleague loses the exclusiveness of his or her influence, which might have suggested some professional respect and job security. "Knowledge is power"

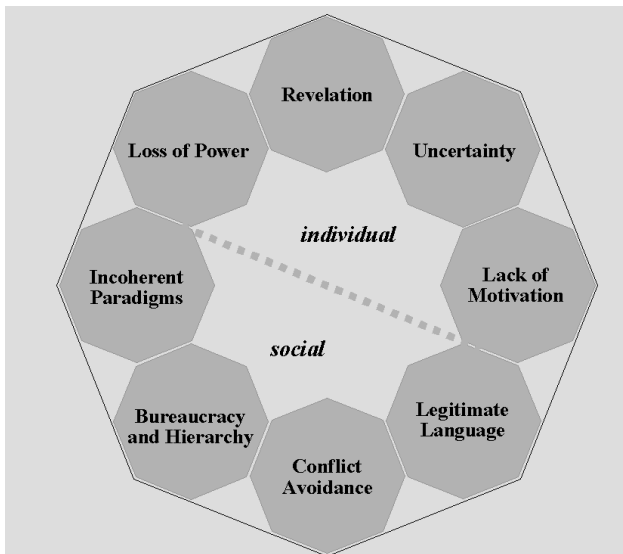
is the well-known citation to describe situations in which experts with rare knowledge have the highest reputation, and monopolies of knowledge causes knowledge hoarding instead of knowledge sharing (Reimus, 1997; Andrews, 2001).

In industries like professional services, employees are competing directly with each other through their special knowledge, gifts, and talents. It might be part of the individual culture of high-performing employees that they voluntarily enter into the competition for scarce seats on their career paths because they like to compete and excel (Quinn, Anderson, & Finkelstein, 1996). But, the drawbacks of competition are obvious: Knowledge workers would be cautious to share their knowledge, because they could possibly give up an individual lead.

Revelation

Passing on knowledge to colleagues or entering working results into a knowledge database may be considered as a revelation, because it proclaims that this knowledge has a certain value and rarity. If this assessment is not shared by others, embarrassment may result (Rodwell & Humphries, 1998). Additionally, hasty colleagues rush to suggest “necessary” improvements to emphasize their expertise. For an individual, knowledge justified as “true belief” is not of particular concern. But in situations of knowledge sharing, more than one individual is involved. At this point, “... justification becomes public. Each individual is faced with the challenge of justifying his true beliefs in presence of other” (Krogh, 1998, p. 35).

Figure 1. Impediments to knowledge sharing



Uncertainty

Less experienced colleagues may feel uncertain, because they cannot judge if their working results and experiences represent valuable knowledge for others. They cannot estimate if their knowledge is too general or too well known or, on the other side, that some results are too specific for a special situation and therefore useless for colleagues in other situations. Positioning on the scale of “general” to “specific” is not trivial and, thus, results in uncertainty.

Lack of Motivation

Sharing knowledge is often seen as additional work because of the time necessary for reflection, documentation, communication, and so forth. Time is scarce, especially if the performance of an organization is measured by billable hours only. Reflection of work and sharing experiences are more an investment for future work than a billable action in the present. As stated in Dixon (2000), “In an organization with a bias for action, the time for reflection may be hard to come by” (p. 18; Hunter, Beaumont, & Lee, 2002).

Some employees do not expect reciprocal benefits from sharing, because they do not believe in these benefits or they did not experience it. Benefits of contributing to a knowledge database are gotten by a different stakeholder later on—the benefits will not be earned by the provider but by others (Nissen, Kamel, & Sengupta, 2000). Therefore, one precondition for contributing is the assumption of an equilibrium—a balanced give and take between colleagues. The insight that knowledge sharing can only be beneficial if everybody provides knowledge unselfishly may have charm only theoretically. In day-to-day practice, the benefit is too uncertain, and payback is not going to be immediate; therefore, the individual’s commitment to share knowledge fails.

Legitimate Language

Some organizations lack a legitimate language (Krogh, 1998) that is known and accepted by all colleagues and can carry individual knowledge. This covers the need for a common language to communicate analogies and metaphors to externalize tacit knowledge hidden in individual mental models, viewpoints, working models, schemata, paradigms, and beliefs (Nelson & Coopriider, 1996; Nonaka, 1994; Haldin-Herrgard, 2000).

Conflict Avoidance

Attitudes of conflict avoidance and some conservative habits may prevent knowledge sharing, if the knowledge

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