Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing (KS) is critical to organizations that wish to use their knowledge as an asset to achieve competitive advantage. Knowledge management systems (KMSs) can be primary enablers of knowledge sharing in an organization.

A major focus of knowledge sharing is on the individual who can explicate, encode, and communicate knowledge to other individuals, groups, and organizations. In particular, the employment of some KMSs requires individuals to contribute their knowledge to a system rather than keeping it to themselves or sharing it only through personal exchanges.

Another major focus of knowledge sharing is on knowledge sharing in teams since teams have become so prominent in management thought and practice, and because some of the long-presumed benefits of teams such as "higher labor productivity, a flatter management structure and reduced employee turnover" have been validated (Glassop, 2002, p. 227).

A major distinction between knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer (terms that may sometimes be used interchangeably) is that transfer implies focus, a clear objective, and unidirectionality, while knowledge may be shared in unintended ways multiple directionally without a specific objective (see article titled "Knowledge Transfer").

Of course, knowledge may also be shared in intended ways, such as when a team attempts to develop mutual knowledge, a common ground, or knowledge that the parties know they share in common (Cramton, 2001).

BACKGROUND

Some people presumably have a tendency to share knowledge just as some people have a tendency to be talkative. Others follow the "knowledge is power" dictum, probably learned in organizational settings; these people may hoard knowledge and be reluctant to share it.

Knowledge sharing may occur between and among individuals, within and among teams, among organizational units, and among organizations. Sharing among individuals within teams is a particularly important focus whether the teams are temporary sets of interdependent individuals bound by a collective aim, problem-solving groups (also usually temporary in nature), self-managing teams, or cross-functional teams (Glassop, 2002). Virtual teams, those in which individuals primarily communicate using electronic means, are becoming a more important focus of KS.

Sharing behavior may be differentiated in terms of the sharing of explicit knowledge (that which is written down or encoded in some fashion) vs. the sharing of tacit knowledge (that which exists in the mind of an individual; Nonaka, 1994), or some combination of the two varieties. Individuals may have different propensities to share explicit and tacit knowledge. They may consider explicit knowledge, such as reports and memos that are in their possession, to be owned by the organization that paid them to produce the documents, whereas they may consider that knowledge that is in their heads belongs to them (Constant, Kiesler, & Sproull, 1994).

Knowledge-management systems of two general varieties are both driven primarily by knowledge sharing. The two types are referred to as repositories and networks, or as the codification and personalization types of KMS strategies (Kankanhalli, Tanudidjaja, Sutanto, & Tan, 2003). Repositories are databases of knowledge usually contributed by individuals, teams, or organizations for potential use by others. The best example is a best-practices repository. Networks facilitate communications among team members or among groups of individuals who are not necessarily identified a priori.

Information technology can enable both types: in the former case, enabling sharing across widely dispersed elements of an organization, and in the latter case, enabling communities of practice involving people who discover that they have common practices or interests to form and share knowledge either within an organization or among various organizations. Probably the best known interorganization community is that which develops and maintains the open-source Linux system (Lee & Cole, 2003).

ISSUES IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Organizations have taken different views on knowledge sharing. Some, believing that there is a danger in giving away secrets or viewing sharing as a diversion from individuals' primary work, have not encouraged sharing. Others, believing that there is great potential benefit in disseminating knowledge within an organization and perhaps beyond its boundaries, support it. Of course, the tenets of knowledge management presume that sharing is generally both beneficial and necessary if an organization is to realize its potential.

Many researchers and those organizations and managers that wish to encourage knowledge sharing have focused on how they might best motivate individuals to share their most valuable personally held knowledge. The concept of knowledge as a public good can serve to illustrate this issue.

Knowledge as a Public Good

A fundamental issue of KMS is demonstrated by the notion of knowledge as a public good. A public good is something that is available to all members of a community or organization regardless of whether they contributed to the constitution of the good. A fundamental problem with public goods is that they are subject to the free-rider problem whereby an individual enjoys the benefits without contributing to the institution or maintenance of the common asset, which may result in an undersupply of the good.

Thorn and Connolly (1987) conducted research that conceptualized information in a database as a public good. They identified cost as a factor for individuals considering sharing their valuable personally held information in terms of sharing cost: the time and/or effort that is required from the individual to share knowledge through a computer-based system. They concluded that this cost is something that is considered by the potential sharer when making the decision of whether to contribute.

Constant et al. (1994) identified positive motivators for individuals to contribute, even when the personal costs may be high. These include the enhancement of self-esteem, the reinforcement of an individual's understanding of their own knowledge, and the shared values of organizational citizenship (Bolino & Turnley, 2003).

Goodman and Darr (1999) identified the contextual conditions in the organization affecting an individual's decision to share his or her knowledge through a KMS. They determined that a sharing culture is necessary prior to the implementation of such a system. They also identified shared rewards as an important element in producing such a culture. Such intangible and cultural variables may well constitute the accepted wisdom among KMS practitioners.

Motivating Knowledge Sharing

Organizations generally rely on either formal supervisory controls or more general organizational support to motivate knowledge sharing. Examples of the former are guidelines that specify what is appropriate sharing behavior and the monitoring of the knowledge that individuals provide to a KMS. Illustrative of the latter is the development of cultural norms that promote sharing.

These quite-different views of how knowledge sharing can be motivated are illustrated in studies conducted by Perlow (1998) and Alvesson (1993).

Perlow (1998) studied knowledge workers in a software-development group where the management of the organization instituted a stringent means of controlling the employees. The company imposed strict demands by monitoring employees, standing over them, and routinely checking up on them. Management instituted mandatory meetings, deadlines, and extra work to ensure that the employees were working in the best interest of the firm. This approach is referred to as supervisory control.

Alvesson (1993) performed a case study of a computer consulting company. The study found that management felt that the company operated efficiently because management strove to have a strong interpersonal culture in the organization. This culture was based on focusing on the organization as a community instead of viewing it as merely a collection of individuals. This approach reflects a general approach referred to as social exchange.

Supervisory Control

Organizations can operate in formal ways that encourage knowledge sharing, for example, by using employment contracts that specify that knowledge and information that is collected or generated in the course of work belongs to the organization. However, such legalistic approaches are difficult to enforce.

However, other forms of supervisory control may have an impact on an individual's willingness to share his or her knowledge through a KMS (Loebecke, Van Fenema, & Powell, 1999). Supervisory control is defined as efforts by management to increase the likelihood that individuals will act in ways that will result in the achievement of organizational objectives (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2001).

Supervisory control is important because an assumption in agency theory, and in some other management literature, is that the goals of the employer and the employee are, to some degree, divergent, necessitating a

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