Chapter 4

Communication Barriers and Social Capital:
Improving Information and Knowledge Flows in Public Services

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to explore ways in which the flows of information and knowledge within public services are affected by social capital. Drawing on communication and social capital theory and making use of network analysis tools, a regional department of a Greek social security entity served as a case study to assess the contribution of social capital to overcoming barriers to effective communication among public sector employees. Structural, relational, and cognitive social capital at a personal level were found to alleviate problems of accessibility as well as problems related to the control of the flow of information by gatekeepers, arbitrarily abridging, or distorting messages. Building new communication channels through personal initiative, establishing and maintaining good relationships among employees, and developing shared perceptions about communication and information sharing are facets of social capital that seem to ensure a more effective knowledge and information flow.

INTRODUCTION

Public sector competencies pertaining to service provision for citizens and businesses involve the transfer of information and knowledge across an often complex network of managers, senior staff and employees in the public sector. An important part of this information, however readily available through a wide range of e-government applications, is still sought through face-to-face interaction with public services front-line employees (Pieterson & Ebbers, 2008). In Greece, in particular, the percentage of citizens who made use of the internet in their dealings with public services was close to 12% in 2010, one of the lowest in OECD countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2011). Respectively, business management literature has showcased a tendency shared by employees to seek information and useful knowledge from coworkers and associates rather than from impersonal sources such as documents or electronic databases (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003; Levin & Cross, 2004), highlighting the importance of people and social structures in knowledge management endeavors (Colnar & Dimovski, 2017). As a result, attention is called to the significance of the role of public sector employees as nodes of a network in which information and knowledge flows before it finally reaches citizens. A network is by definition characterized by the existence or lack of connections among nodes; social capital theory, examining resources and benefits stemming from one's participation in social networks (Burt, 1997, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998; Tsai & Goshal, 1998), is therefore a useful tool in studying the effectiveness of flows in the information transfer network.

As the processing and transfer of information and knowledge is part of the communication process, effective communication is key to the effectiveness of services provided. Factors facilitating or hindering the communication process respectively enhance or limit the effectiveness of knowledge and information flows. The role of communication in the creation of social capital has been thoroughly studied (e.g. Coleman, 1988; Pang, Shin, Lew, & Walther, 2018; Thomas & Paul, 2019; Tsai & Goshal, 1998); the reciprocity of this relationship, however, namely the potential influence of social capital on communication frequency and quality, is yet to be explored. Furthermore, social capital research has been centered on private firms (e.g. Allameh, 2018; Carey, Lawson, & Krause, 2011; Cousins, Handfield, Lawson, & Petersen, 2006; Inkpen & Tsang 2005; Villena, Revilla, & Choi, 2011) while public organizations studies have mostly focused on the effect of trust (Pee & Kankanhalli, 2016).

In this chapter two significant communication barriers will be considered: accessibility problems, i.e. lack of connection –or in other words communication- between nodes in the network, impeding the flow of information; and problems

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