An Organizational Approach to Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Organizational knowledge has long been considered a valuable asset, that when effectively managed can lead to growth and profitability. The paper explores the different types of knowledge, why individuals are unwilling to share their knowledge, and how organizations can promote knowledge sharing.

INTRODUCTION

A key factor associated with successfully managing knowledge is creating an environment that encourages individuals to share their knowledge. This research examines why individuals within an organization are unwilling to share their knowledge, but more importantly, it addresses what organizations can do to promote knowledge sharing.

Knowledge Defined

First, a basic understanding of knowledge and knowledge management is presented. Knowledge exists on individual, group, and organizational levels (De Long and Fahey, 2000). Second, knowledge is either explicit or tacit (De Long and Fahey, 2000). Explicit knowledge, found in processes or routines that follow some predetermined set of logical guidelines, is the most common form and easiest to codify and manage (Grover and Davenport, 2001). Tacit knowledge is embedded in an individual's thinking, making it difficult to capture and transform into something useful.

Individual knowledge can be conceptual or conscious (De Long and Fahey, 2000). Knowing how to build a house is an example of a conscious thought process whereas designing the structural plans of a house requires abstract knowledge. Social or collaborative knowledge, on the other hand, "is largely tacit, shared by group members, and develops only as a result of working together." (De Long and Fahey, 2000, p. 114) Organizational knowledge is rooted in a firm's processes, procedures, rules and policies (De Long and Fahey, 2000).

The Nature of Knowledge Management

Knowledge Management (KM) is concerned with the creation, capture, integration, and utilization of knowledge within the context of an organizational setting (Schultz, 2001). Further, knowledge management systems (KMSs) facilitate codifying and distributing knowledge. Effective KM can be appreciated internally as well as externally. Externally consumers experience benefits through more efficient service and better products. Internally, both process and organizational outcomes are positively impacted by KM (Alavi and Leidner, 1999). Within the context of financial benefits, sales can increase, and costs decrease. The main challenge of KM and KMS implementation is organizational acceptance. "The emphasis on people is deliberate because technology itself cannot deliver benefits. Technology only enables people to work better, and it is new ways of working that deliver the benefits." (Murray, 2002, p. 74) In the next section, why individuals within an organization are unwilling to share their knowledge is addressed, followed by what organizations can do to promote knowledge sharing.

WILLINGNESS TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE

To understand why people are unwilling to share knowledge and to determine what would entice or encourage them to be more open to sharing knowledge with others, a pilot study was conducted. Approximately 75 business professionals were surveyed at the May 2002 Rochester Chapter of APICS professional development meeting of which approximately forty percent of the respondents were women. Most of those surveyed were employed by small and medium-sized manufacturers in the Rochester, NY and surrounding area.

Current Knowledge Sharing

Based on the survey results, 73 percent of the people are very willing to share knowledge within their organization while 23 percent were somewhat willing to share knowledge. Only one person was neutral and two people were somewhat unwilling. For the most part, people who took this survey currently share knowledge with their co-workers on one level or another. While we do not know to what degree knowledge is shared, 71 percent said they share knowledge often while 28 percent said they sometimes share knowledge. Only one person rarely shares information within the organization (see Figure 1).

More than half of the people surveyed said that they are not evaluated by management based on their willingness to share knowledge with others in their organization. For the most part, people share knowledge on their own, without formal recognition. Sixty percent of those surveyed said it is very important to management for workers to share knowledge with others. In addition, 75 percent said that management does not enforce knowledge sharing in any meaningful way that negatively affects a person's job performance.

Out of those surveyed, 89 percent said that they feel that it is necessary to share information or knowledge with co-workers. There was not one person that felt that sharing knowledge was unnecessary, while eight people abstained from answering the question. Since the
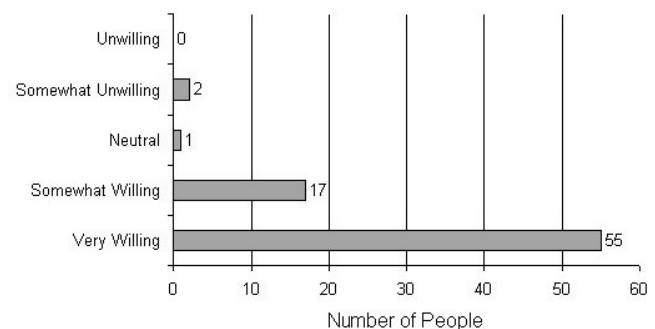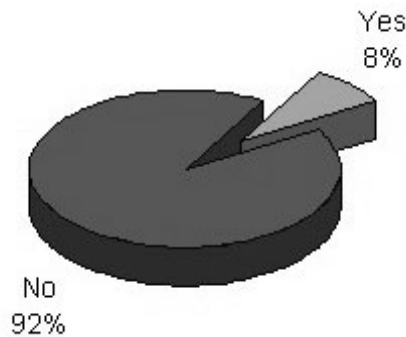
Figure 1: Willingness to Share Knowledge

Figure 2: Currently Compensated for Knowledge Sharing

Figure 3: Motivation for Sharing Knowledge With Others

majority of the professionals surveyed felt that sharing knowledge with co-workers is important, then why are some people hesitant to share knowledge?

Why Knowledge Is Not Shared?

Many reasons exist for why some people are reluctant to share knowledge with others. One reason is knowledge can be a source of power. It provides those employees that possess certain types of knowledge an advantage over employees who cannot create or rediscover it. Job security may also be a factor. An additional reason why people may be unwilling to share with others is the lack of incentives. About half of those people surveyed said they would be more willing to share knowledge with others if their employers offered incentives for knowledge sharing.

Another reason why people are unwilling to share knowledge with others is the corporate culture and its corresponding value system does not encourage it. A majority of those surveyed said that management does not encourage knowledge sharing in any meaningful way (see Figure 2). While the majority felt that management thinks it is very important to share knowledge, they do not have any means of making it mandatory within an organization. If it was part of a person's job performance evaluation, he or she may be more open to sharing knowledge with others on a regular basis.

Reasons for Knowledge Sharing

Everyone has a value system; some are intrinsic, others extrinsic. Individuals with intrinsic value systems tend to more naturally share knowledge. They help others simply for the sake of helping. They do not need rewards, incentives or recognition. Those individuals with extrinsic value systems are less willing to share knowledge with others. If they have something of value, they expect something in return for sharing it. As long as they are rewarded, they are happy. Otherwise, they are unwilling to share knowledge for the simple personal satisfaction of helping others.

For the most part, there are a few main reasons why people share knowledge. When asked what motivates them to share knowledge with others, the majority of the responses were to help others in the organization, personal satisfaction, and because it is best for the company (see Figure 3). Since those who actively share knowledge think that it is best for the company, those who do not share knowledge may start to if the company recognizes its importance and rewards knowledge sharing. While very few people surveyed said that their motivation primarily stems from recognition, rewards or promotions, this type of incentive system should not be discounted. The following section explores ways to encourage knowledge sharing.

PROMOTING KNOWLEDGE SHARING

There are many ways for organizations to promote knowledge sharing. Rewards based on team performance, the physical layout of the workspace, along with support from management, will all encourage knowledge sharing.
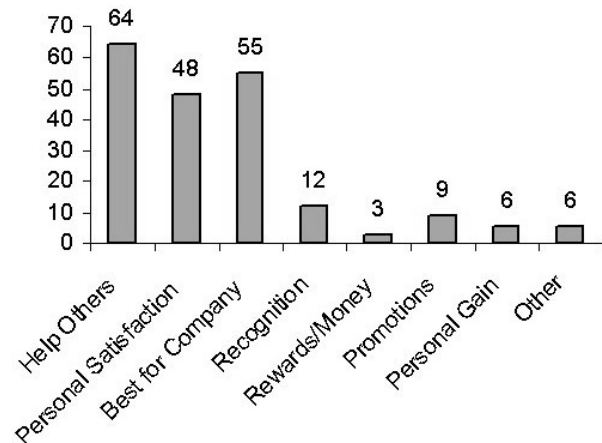
Rewards and Recognition

Team-based rewards must be consistent with team dynamics in order for the rewards to properly motivate. Organizations that have team-based rewards along with merit systems based upon an individual's team contribution will have more productive and motivated group members. The transition from individual work and rewards to a team-based work environment can be complex and difficult to manage.

At Xerox, recognition is a driving factor among the photocopier maintenance engineers who perform "fix-its, work-arounds, patches, and so on." (Earl, 2001, p. 219) Xerox handles tricky repairs by having engineers submit a possible solution to a panel of peer assessors who evaluate the solution while taking into consideration the novelty, worthiness, and practicality of the proposed solution. If the solution is approved, it is added to the knowledge base of the company and the engineer is rewarded with the prestige of finding a solution to a unique problem that others may use in the future (Earl 2001).

Physical Work Environment

The physical layout of workspace directly influences the openness of communication and the ease at which employees share knowledge within the company. Open spaces promote a more collaborative atmosphere than spaces divided into cubicles. Open dialogue can commence at a moment's notice instead of scheduling a meeting where people are late or unable to attend due to scheduling difficulties. Dialogue sets the groundwork for new ideas, and consequently the possibility of knowledge (Gold et al, 2001, p. 189).

Intranets and Management

Intranets are a prominent part of many work environments. An intranet, an internal communication network, is sometimes thought of as a "quick fix" that will automatically boost productivity. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Cultures that reward its members for innovative thinking and continual learning are supportive of intranets (Ruppel and Harrington, 2001).

An intranet's main function is to facilitate the sharing of information quickly and efficiently. The culture of an organization must actively encourage KM and intranet use for it to be efficient (Ruppel and Harrington, 2001). A contribution-based work culture will utilize the intranet in a more efficient manner than a company that simply implements an intranet to solve problems quickly. However, it is quite difficult to put into practice a knowledge management culture if it does not already exist (Ruppel and Harrington, 2001).

Management's role should be one that supports and encourages employees to share. Management should be receptive to reasonable suggestions and provide employees with constant feedback. In addition, it is an excellent idea for management to regularly accept feedback from employees. Reward and recognition programs can support activities

that employees are engaged in, especially ones that are critical for the company and relate to knowledge sharing. Through various incentive programs, management can motivate employees to do their best and not horde information and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

For an organization to fully utilize their employees' potential, employees must be encouraged to share knowledge. Management must promote and support the creation, sharing and use of knowledge among employees and discourage knowledge hording. Successful companies have employees who consistently collaborate, cooperate and communicate both formally and informally. As our pilot study showed, individuals are willing to share their knowledge and just need to be encouraged to do so. The organization must take the initiative and start compensating employees when they do share knowledge. This will create an environment conducive to creating a competitive, agile organization.

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