Chapter 83
Knowledge Producers and Consumers

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INTRODUCTION

In a knowledge-based economy, organizations find it difficult to compete based upon the individual knowledge of a few organizational members. This provides the rationale for *knowledge management* wherein organizational knowledge must be shared, combined, and reused in order to enable organizations to compete more effectively. Hence, *knowledge sharing* is considered an essential process in knowledge management. Unfortunately, sharing is often unnatural for the parties involved in it, that is, knowledge contributors or producers and knowledge seekers or consumers. Hoarding knowledge and not accepting knowledge from others are natural tendencies that are difficult to change (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). *Knowledge contributors* may be inhibited from sharing their knowledge due to perceptions of loss of power, lack of time or incentives, and other barriers. *Knowledge seekers* may find it laborious to seek advice from others and desire to discover solutions for themselves. Therefore, it is vital to understand and foster the *motivations* of knowledge contributors and seekers toward participating in knowledge sharing.

With the attention to knowledge management and the knowledge-based view of the firm, research in knowledge sharing and its motivations has gained interest over the last decade and a half. The initial focus of research was on investigating what motivates knowledge contribution (e.g., Orlikowski 1993; Constant, Kiesler, & Sproull, 1994) as this appeared to be a more intractable problem than motivating knowledge seeking. Subsequently, knowledge seeking behavior also has been researched (e.g., Goodman & Darr, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2000; Kankanhalli, Tan, &

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Wei, 2001), although there is still considerably more attention devoted to studying knowledge contribution behavior.

Concurrently, the role of technology (known as *knowledge management system* or KMS) in enabling knowledge sharing has received research interest. However, in spite of the advent of new technology enabled forms of knowledge sharing such as knowledge logging (the enterprise flavor of blogging), the challenges of promoting knowledge sharing persist. This is because culture and management issues appear to dominate over technological issues in ensuring knowledge sharing success. For example, Ruppel and Harrington (2001) found that employee acceptance of or resistance to Intranets as a knowledge-sharing environment was more of a management and culture problem rather than a technology hurdle. Calls have been made to address both social and technical issues together (Zack, 1999) in order to be able to reap the benefits of knowledge management that have been experienced by some organizations (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

BACKGROUND

Knowledge sharing is typically defined in two ways depending on the perspective toward knowledge. Researchers who view knowledge as an object tend to use the term "knowledge transfer" while others who see knowledge as a process use the term "knowledge sharing" (Allee, 1997). The notions of knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer can be combined by defining knowledge sharing as voluntary activities (process) of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person to another person or group in an organization (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999). A number of theoretical perspectives have been used to investigate the motivation of knowledge contributors and seekers.

Public Goods Theory

One of the initial lenses employed in studying motivations in knowledge sharing has been public goods theory (e.g., Thorn & Connolly, 1987; Fulk, Flanagin, Kalman, Monge, & Ryan, 1996). Knowledge shared in an organization through means such as a knowledge repository (referred to as a discretionary database in some previous literature) can be considered as a public good, that is, non-excludable, non-rival, and exhibiting jointness of supply. Knowledge shared is considered non-excludable because other repository users who did not contribute to its production are not prevented from access to the knowledge. The knowledge is non-rival because even if one consumer uses the knowledge, it still remains available to others, who also may apply the knowledge in their own situations. The knowledge contributed exhibits jointness of supply because it costs as much to produce for use by one person as for use by many.

Research along this perspective tends to focus on the motivational dilemma faced by knowledge contributors to such repositories. The dilemma for knowledge contributors is that collective interests bid them to share knowledge whereas self-interest may discourage them from contributing. Collective interest suggests that knowledge contributed will allow it to be combined or reused for greater benefit to the organization (Fulk et al., 1996). However, self-interest seems to dictate that contributing knowledge would reduce the unique knowledge possessed by the individual and thereby make him or her more replaceable in the organization (Kollock, 1999). In a broader sense, the dilemma for the community is that all members of the community stand to gain if everyone contributes. However, individually members are better off free-riding on the contributions of others. Therefore, research along this stream tries to understand how to promote collective action of knowledge contribution when it does not appear individually rational (Wasko & Faraj, 2000).