

Chapter 87

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, group or organization (who) that 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 are sometimes confusingly used interchangeably) is that transfer implies focus, a clear objective and unidirectionality, while knowledge may be shared in unintended ways, multi-directionally and without a single specific objective (see article titled “Knowledge Transfer”).

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Of course, knowledge is most often shared in intended ways, such as when a team attempts to develop mutual knowledge, sometimes called “common ground”, or knowledge that the parties know that they share in common (Cramton, 2001).

BACKGROUND

Knowledge sharing may occur between and among individuals, within and among teams, within and among organizational units, and within 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 temporal 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.

Knowledge sharing, while presumably being beneficial to organizations and societies, often must be motivated, either intrinsically or extrinsically (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Knowledge sharing implies conflict of interest or vulnerability (von Krogh, 1998; Argote, Gruenfeld, & Naquin, 2001). People may tend to hoard knowledge if they believe that sharing it will hinder their personal efforts to distinguish themselves relative to their coworkers (Huber 2001). They may follow the “knowledge is power” dictum, learned in organizational settings, and are reluctant to share it for “fear of losing ownership, a position of privilege, (and) superiority” (Szulanski, 1996; p. 31).

Both extrinsic motivations (e.g., monetary compensation and recognition) and intrinsic motivations (e.g., sense of self-worth, social norms, and social affiliation) have been studied as important drivers to motivate knowledge sharing within organizations (Osterloh & Frey, 2000; Bock et al., 2005; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005). In addition, some people presumably have a tendency

to share knowledge just as some people have a tendency to be talkative. Matzler and colleagues (2008) discovered significant correlations between three personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness) and knowledge sharing.

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), 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. An 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 widely dispersed elements of an organization to store and retrieve knowledge at a virtual central place (e.g., a knowledge repository), 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 inter-organization community is that which develops and maintains the open-source Linux software system (Lee & Cole, 2003).

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