Chapter 8

Knowledge Sharing Behavior of Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Active knowledge sharing is considered an important activity in the learning process. However until now, the focus of many studies has been on understanding the impact of information and knowledge sharing on the performance of corporate and public organizations. On the other hand, its implications in the educational arena have been relatively unexplored. The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions, nature and extent of knowledge sharing among graduate students in Singapore. It also investigated the factors and class activities that would either promote or inhibit knowledge sharing among students. A questionnaire was used for data collection and 183 students from two public universities in Singapore participated in this study. The study revealed that the participants were primarily motivated to share information and knowledge in an attempt to build relationships with their peers and email was the preferred communication channel for this purpose. However, intense competition among the students to outperform their classmates and the lack of depth in relationship were the two most important factors hindering the knowledge sharing activity. The study suggests that academic institutions should review their instruction approaches to make the learning process less competitive which would help improve knowledge sharing among students.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of knowledge-based economy and complexity of work environment have reinforced the need for effective exploitation of knowledge and making knowledge management an essential area of activity in organizations. Therefore, knowledge is now regarded as a precious resource for augmenting traditional factors of production (Choi, Lee & Yoo, 2010). In fact, knowledge is increasingly viewed as a crucial determinant of an organization’s competitive advantage (Chia et al., 2005; Almahamid, Awwad & McAdams, 2010) which can help organizations survive in
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a highly competitive, dynamic, and volatile environment. Among the knowledge management activities, the notion of knowledge sharing has generated much interest among academics and practitioners in recent years. Many studies have focused on investigating factors that influence various aspects of knowledge sharing, although most of such studies were conducted in the context of business and public organizations. This is not surprising, given the fact that many of the knowledge management initiatives were initially implemented in these organizations. Although education institutions, to some extent, are different from business and public organizations, active information and knowledge sharing is considered vital for the learning process. In general, problems attributed to the lack of knowledge sharing among students can also be studied on the same lines as in corporate and public organizations.

Factors Affecting Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is considered as a social behavior and many physical, technological, psychological, cultural, and personality factors either promote or inhibit this activity (Chiri & Klobas, 2010; Cyr & Choo, 2010; Wu & Munir, 2010). Often people feel pleased by helping others through sharing their knowledge because for them it is a satisfying, fulfilling and meaningful activity (Beitler & Mitlacher, 2007). However, literature suggests that strong personal ties and mutual respect can motivate individuals to share knowledge with their peers. Cyr & Choo (2010) also highlighted that reciprocity together with trust promotes knowledge sharing. Alstyne (2005) also agreed that trust is an important factor in developing positive interpersonal relationships which encourages knowledge sharing. Mutual trust is often developed over time through frequent interactions and that is why it is important that adequate time and opportunities should be provided for developing cordial relations.

Despite the immense benefits of knowledge sharing, as often advocated by researchers and practitioners, it is a fact that in many situations, people avoid sharing their knowledge. Davenport (1997) argued that the act of knowledge sharing is unnatural and there are plenty of reasons why people avoid sharing their knowledge. The lack of in-depth relationship between the source and recipient of knowledge, lack of motivation or rewards to share (Smith & McKeen, 2003), lack of time, and non-existence of knowledge sharing culture (Siakas, Georgiadou & Balstrup, 2010) are some of the factors that are likely to impede knowledge sharing among peers. In addition, lack of understanding of what to share and with whom to share, limited appreciation for knowledge sharing, and the fear of providing wrong information can also hamper the knowledge sharing activity (Majid & Wey, 2008; Ardichvili, Page & Wentling, 2003; Skyrme, 2002).

Knowledge Sharing in Academic Institutions

Many studies have highlighted the fact that information and knowledge sharing plays an important role in the learning and development of individuals (Chiu, 2010). In addition to lecturer-centric approaches, several new instruction strategies such as problem-oriented teaching, contextualized teaching, target-oriented teaching, and interactive and collaborative teaching are gaining popularity. These innovative teaching methods have already turned instruction into sharing (Zhou, Knoke, Sakamoto, 2005).

Majid and Tina (2009) noted that many academic institutions are now emphasizing their teaching staff to incorporate group discussions, team projects, and other cooperative activities in their instruction approaches. These cooperative learning activities can bring many benefits such as better student achievements, improved communication skills, and a positive attitude towards knowledge sharing (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002).