Tacit Knowledge Management Within Hospitality Establishments: Revealing the Body of the Iceberg

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ABSTRACT

Tacit knowledge is a concept developed in connection with knowledge management research field. It is acknowledged as the cornerstone of competitive advantage; however, merely its possession does not guarantee an edge in fierce competition. Even though tacit knowledge holds a dominative role towards labor efficiency, productivity and innovation, the subject of tacit knowledge acquisition and transfer has been rather unexploited, mostly due to its intrinsic, highly personal and seamlessly bonded to holder’s personality, attributes. The purpose of the article is to contribute to the exploitation of the embedded tacit knowledge of employees in hospitality establishments, a sector where the employment of tacit knowledge has to be extensive and foremost, capitalizing the maximum of personnel competences. Moreover, the paper correlates tacit knowledge acquisition and transfer, with behaviors stemming from a working environment where task assignment is adjusted to employees personal characteristics. Towards this goal, research hypotheses were built and tested, using SEM Methodology.

KEYWORDS

Hotel Accommodation Establishments, Personal Characteristics, Tacit Knowledge Acquisition and Transfer, Task Assignment

1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has been identified as an ongoing, dynamic process involving the overlapping actions of acquisition and transfer, stimulating growth and development in organizations (Davenport and Prusak, 2000; Haldin-Herrgard, 2000; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). During the last decades, there have been various attempts to classify the types of knowledge (Lemos and Joia, 2010; Leonard and Sensiper, 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), an early and seminal distinction, though, has been made by Polanyi, (1962) who distinguish explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit is the type of knowledge which is possible to codify, therefore feasible to diffuse, discuss, prove and acquire (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1991, Davenport and Prusak 1998). On the contrary, tacit knowledge is almost impossible to codify and manage. Polanyi (1966), postulated “we know more than we can tell” implying that tacit knowledge, is quite difficult to manage and transfer (Joia, 2007; Leonard and Sensiper, 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1997). Tacit knowledge management has been the subject of many scientific researches during the last few decades, but, as Shaw and Williams (2009) argued, it is still an emerging agenda in tourism, even though in hotel management operations, the value of tacit knowledge was deemed by the researchers as highly significant (El-Sharkawy, 2007, Hallin and Marburg, 2007, Wang and Noe, 2010).
2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Tacit knowledge widely, is considered to be the cornerstone of competitive advantage for a wide spectrum of organizations (e.g. Murray and Peyrefitte, 2007; BouLlusar and Segarra-Ciprés, 2006; Becerra-Fernandez & Sabherwal, 2001Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) deriving from personal experience and filtered through possessor’s personal characteristics. (O’Dell and Grayson 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1996). Moreover, according to Hasher & Zacks, (1979), Dulani (1996) and Chilton & Bloodgood, (2008) tacit knowledge becomes a habit or a routine, frequently repeated and largely depended from intuition, feelings, insights and personal attributes. In line with this, tacit knowledge has a highly personal nature, is subjective, thus difficult to formalize, manage, process, acquire, reutilize and transfer.

Researchers such as Van der Spek & Spijkervert, (2007), Marquard (2006), Davenport and Prusak, (1998) Collins (1993), Hahn and Subramani (2000), Accenture (2000), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996) Szulanski (2006), seem to agree on the basis that tacit knowledge is mainly subconscious and expressed, by “doing things” -individually or as a group-. Such behaviors as means of tacit knowledge acquisition and transfer could be the subject of observation, a story to remember, tell and discuss among the members of the personnel. In other words, tacit knowledge transfer success depends on the levels and ease of informal communication and relationship between the source and recipient.

Based on the preferences and value of tacit knowledge (Murray and Hanlon 2010), the initial scientific question was raised, focusing on “whether tacit knowledge can be successfully distributed among hotel employees and to what extent”. To answer this question, the researcher focused on behaviors, which according to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996) is a valuable resource of tacit knowledge. In fact the researcher addresses the ability of any organization’s leadership to stimulate behaviors that could facilitate effective tacit knowledge management. Associating management styles and behaviors, Wagner and Hollenbeck (2005) and George and Jones (2011), support the argument that each management style falls into a particular set of workflow rules that exploit employee personal qualities, determining organizational behavior and task performing methods (see Figure 1).

Under the assumption of direct positive association between the currently valid set of workflow rules, employees’ personal characteristics and behavior in hotel establishments, the basic working hypothesis (H1) was formed, arguing that the adjustment of task assignment to personal qualities and characteristics will grant employees the ability to develop behaviors that will facilitate tacit knowledge acquisition and transfer. In line with the hypothesis, the variable of Personal Characteristics (PC) -adjusting task assignment with labor skills and personal characteristics- was developed to observe the correlation between personnel Personal Characteristics (PC) and tacit knowledge acquisition and transfer (TKA&T) in a working environment where the task and the working place is adjusted to personal characteristics.

\[ H_1: \text{Tacit Knowledge Acquisition and Transfer (TKA & T) process is positively correlated with task assignment adjusted to employees’ Personal Characteristics (PC).} \]

Nevertheless, the ability to comprehend personal qualities within the assigned task, requires trust, clear and thorough communication, commitment and appropriate organizational structures. Researching on the ability to value tacit knowledge, the variables social behavior, communication, trust, willingness to help and management style were observed and emphasized as significant. Roberts (2000) supports the argument that a stable, trustworthy and reliable social relationship network reduces the fear of knowledge sharing, while Grant (1996) stated that trust and socialization are equally important during the stage of knowledge share. Brachos et al (2007) highlights the importance of social interaction and trust towards the effective knowledge management, while Lemos and Joia (2010) postulated that a personal relationship framework could be an ex ante precondition for knowledge diffusion, enabling the human factor to express their idiosyncratic characteristics.
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