Tapping Diverse Experiences: 
Toward Articulating Knowledge Creation Theory

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ABSTRACT

Tapping diverse experiences is recognised as important for knowledge creation. The authors examine how learning and knowledge creation are affected if a distinction between the extent and nature of employees’ involvement, and differences in levels within these, is made. They offer propositions suggesting that the extent and nature of employees involvement differ in their relative contribution to different facets of knowledge creation, including shared understanding, know-why, knowledge creating behaviours and new product creativity. Finally, the authors discuss theoretical implications, future research directions and limitations of this research.

KEYWORDS

Diverse Experiences, Employee Involvement, Know-Why, Knowledge Creation, Shared Understanding

INTRODUCTION

Diverse experiences are important for the creation of new knowledge (Milosovic, Bass & Combs, 2015; Whelan & Carcary, 2011). Knowledge creation is positively enhanced with an exposure to pluralistic specialisations and ideas (Kim & King, 2004; Niu, 2010). Employees with diverse experiences are important sources of pluralistic specialization and ideas based on their experiential knowledge (Park, 2010). Employees’ involvement, therefore, becomes crucial for knowledge creation (Latukha, 2016; Nonaka, 1994) in order to tap their diverse experiences. However, we understand little about how employees’ involvement contributes to knowledge creation.

The knowledge creation literature indicates two important aspects of employees’ involvement - extent and nature. In terms of its extent, scholars have identified that rather than merely involving functional employees (i.e. at one organizational level), employees at all (or multiple) organizational levels should be involved in creating new knowledge (Hedlund, 1994; Nonaka, 1991; Pascale, Millemann & Gioja, 1997). In terms of the nature of involvement, it is indicated that it is not just the mere involvement of employees but how deep is their involvement which matters. For examples, scholars have argued that it is the higher-level as opposed to lower-level learning which creates new knowledge (Argyris, 1991; Argyris & Schön, 1978). Nevertheless, the existing literature has not adequately taken the distinction between the extent and nature of employees’ involvement into account in understanding knowledge creation. This understanding becomes particularly important in the wake of the calls for the consolidation and harmonization of the knowledge management concepts (Baskerville & Dulipovici, 2006; Heisig, 2009) and the integration of these concepts with organizational learning (Yoon and Ardichvili, 2010).

Employees’ involvement remains to be understood in terms of how it relates to different, important aspects of knowledge creation. Scholars here point to the importance of four aspects which we focus on. Firstly, is the importance of shared understanding. Shared understanding is the mind/
common knowledge collectively held by organizational members and which binds them together as a cohesive group (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000). Secondly is the importance of an individuals’ know-why. Know-why is the deep understanding of the underlying web of cause-and-effect relationships (Quinn, Anderson & Finkelstein, 1998; Sparrow, 1998), a source which generates new ideas and meaning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990). Thirdly are the knowledge creating behaviours. Scholars have argued that creating new knowledge requires a ‘way of behaving’ in which learning, reflection and knowledge sharing is continuous (Nonaka, 1994, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Finally, is the new product creativity. Scholars have suggested that creative outcomes which are characterised by higher levels of novelty, such as discontinuous innovations, contribute more to developing organizational competitiveness than those characterised by lower levels of novelty, such as continuous innovations (Cheng & Van de Ven, 1996; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud & Venkataraman, 2008).

Following the above, we conceptually analyse how the extent and nature of employees’ involvement relates to shared understanding, know-why, knowledge creating behaviours and new product creativity. To understand these, we analyse the differences in levels within the extent and nature of employees’ involvement in terms of team structure/dynamics, interactions, experimentation and dialogue. Our aim is to contribute to theory-building by developing specific propositions, identifying the differentiated and nuanced relationships between the employees’ involvement and knowledge creation. In the subsequent sections, we first review the literature on how knowledge is defined and transformed and the importance of divergent perspectives thereof. Next, we examine the extent to which diverse experiences have been studied to identify the gap. We then explain our framework, and a two-part discussion, i.e. the extent and nature of employees’ involvement, and the differences in levels within these, including propositions for the illustrated relationships. Finally, we identify the control variables, and consider the implications, future research directions and limitations of our framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and Concepts

Knowledge is usually distinguished from information. Information is the meaningful organization and/or interpretation of data (facts or observations) (Siadat et al., 2012). Knowledge, on the other hand, is person-embodied and not detached from the individual (Leonard-Barton, 1995). In contrast to the objective, absolute and static view, knowledge is often regarded as relative, transformable and historically transient (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), defined as the process of justifying belief (Nonaka, 1994). Knowledge is also distinguished between its levels, i.e. the point of view, or rank in scale or size of importance, among others, that exists in a particular situation and time. For example, viewing phenomenon on the surface represents knowledge at the superficial level, whereas viewing its underlying governing variables represents knowledge at a deeper level (Inkpen & Crossan, 1990). It represents the systemic ability to subjectively view phenomena at different objective levels, such as lower and higher level, superficial or deep level, single- or double-loop, and so on.

Knowledge is also distinguished between its explicit and tacit components. Explicit knowledge is the formal and structured knowledge (Kim, 1993) and easy to be transferred, communicated and transformed. It is acquired through practice, repetition, reinforcement, imitation, socialization, or logical deduction and formal study (Lam, 2000). In contrast, tacit knowledge is the highly subjective insights, intuitions and hunches (Nonaka, 1991), and the accumulated skills and experiences (Leroy & Ramanantsoa, 1997). It is difficult to be formalized, codified, organized (Kim, 1993) or transferred and communicated, and can only be shared (Lam, 2000). It is internalized through assimilation (Kim,
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