Chapter 9

Factors Influencing Knowledge as Practice in the Knowledge Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines issues around sharing subjective knowledge as practice in an organization, exploring what knowledge means to those working with it, how knowledge sharing happens in practice, and what influences its effectiveness. It is suggested that knowledge as practice as internalized by individuals can be difficult to communicate for a range of reasons, many relating to the effects of organizational subcultures on employee self-efficacy. A case study is used to illustrate this, based on fieldwork carried out in a research organization using the appreciative inquiry method to look at influences on the individual practice of knowledge sharing. An environment that promotes cognitive and affective trust amongst an organization’s employees may go some way to address these issues.

INTRODUCTION

In organisations, different types of knowledge can be recognised. For those working in an organisation whose business is knowledge development and deployment, knowledge as practice is a crucial attribute and complements the explicit knowledge available in an organisation. In knowledge as practice, workers make use of their subjective understanding and expertise in exercising judgement on how explicit knowledge can be used. This knowledge as practice complements explicit knowledge but is
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hard to pin down, and harder to communicate or share. In this chapter we explore what knowledge as practice means to those working with it, how knowledge sharing happens in practice and what influences its effectiveness. A case study is used to illustrate this, based on fieldwork carried out in a research organisation using the Appreciative Inquiry Method (e.g. Stowell & Welch, 2013) to look at influences on the individual practice of knowledge sharing. It is suggested that knowledge as practice as internalised by individuals can be difficult to communicate for a range of reasons, many relating to the effects of organisational culture on employee self-efficacy.

Organisational Knowledge

The effective sharing of knowledge is a critical success factor for organisations, but there are ontological questions about what is meant by ‘knowledge’. Knowledge management as a discipline over the past two decades has privileged particular views of what organisational knowledge is, treating it as an asset or ‘content’, which can be created, manipulated and stored. Knowledge appears to be used as a synonym for information, this trend emphasised by the move to data analytics (Pauleen & Wang, 2017). On the other hand, Spender’s (2009) concept of knowledge as practice allows for inclusion of the human element - subjectivity of experience, exchange of tacit aspects, and how this is expressed in social networks (Dixon, 2010) and used to inform expertise. This interpretivist view of knowledge sees it as socially-constructed, context-sensitive and dependent on history (von Krogh, Roos & Slocum, 1994).

The different concepts of knowledge, and the interaction between them, can be a source of innovation for the organisation (Cook & Brown, 1999). Tsoukas (1996) suggests that explicit, objective knowledge can only be made use of once it is appreciated subjectively, taking into account context, tacit knowledge, motivation, and the other aspects relating to human subjectivity. In this way it is ‘reattached to and embedded in the ongoing processes of the organisation’ (Spender, 1996): knowledge as practice. Individuals will attribute different meanings to the same phenomena and may change their minds about meaning over time. The decisions they make are not solely on a rational basis, but are influenced by their individual and subjective perspectives. An interpretive approach to investigating individual ideas about knowledge sharing, for both explicit knowledge and knowledge as practice, is therefore worthwhile.

Factors in Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing in organisations enables members to benefit from each other’s knowledge and expertise, allowing them to contribute ideas and experience (Ipe, 2003;
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