Chapter X

The Value of Trust in Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT
Knowledge sharing is currently at the forefront of research in the areas of organizational management and electronic business. Research has focused on aspects of knowledge sharing such as trust, quality of knowledge shared, and task complexity. This chapter builds on past inquiries of trust in knowledge sharing by examining how the benefits obtained from knowledge sharing change as trust levels change. A Repeated Measures ANOVA design is used to test the impact of trust on knowledge sharing. Task completion time, the dependent variable, measures the effect of knowledge sharing. Statistical analysis suggests that the benefit obtained from knowledge sharing increases as trust level increases.

INTRODUCTION
Knowledge is not a “thing” that can be “managed.” It is a capacity of people and communities, continuously generated and renewed in their conversation, to meet
new challenges and opportunities (Grant, 1995). Knowledge comes into being, is shared, given meaning, evaluated, developed, accessed, and applied best by groups of people. Knowledge is of limited value if it is not shared. The ability to integrate and apply the specialized knowledge of organizational members is fundamental to an organization’s ability to create and sustain competitive advantage (Grant, 1995). Knowledge sharing involves the integration of explicit, formalized information existent in an organization with the tacit knowledge existent in the minds of individuals in an organization.

Trust is a basic feature of social situations that require cooperation and interdependence (Earley, 1986). It is a key to positive interpersonal relationships in various settings (Lewis, Weight, 1985) because it is central to how individuals interact with others. Thus, trust has a central role in knowledge sharing, which refers to all activities intended to establish, develop, and maintain the exchange of knowledge.

The most significant contributions to the conceptualization and measurement of the trust construct can be found in studies of inter-organizational relationships (Deutsch, 1958). However, because trust is considered so vital, it has been studied extensively in many research disciplines, such as economics (Anderson, Weitz, 1992), social psychology (Schlenker et al., 1973), and political sciences (Van-Lohuizen, 1986). Agreement concerning the positive effects of trust is rising (Kramer, Tyler 1996), and consensus has emerged on how interpersonal trust evolves (Lewicki, Bunker, 1995; Zand, 1972). However, the current literature does not address varying degrees of trust and how they may influence knowledge sharing.

The research reported in this chapter contributes to the knowledge sharing literature by addressing the issue of how changing trust levels impact knowledge sharing. We argue that as trust level increases, the benefits obtained from knowledge sharing increase. While preparing the experiment for this research, the issues of knowledge quality and task complexity were identified as relevant for knowledge sharing (Mayer, 1995). However, in an effort to isolate impacts of trust levels, knowledge quality and task complexity were held constant. The effects of knowledge quality and task complexity on sharing are left for future work. The next section discusses some of the underlying concepts relevant for knowledge sharing and formally presents the research hypotheses. Then, in Section 3 the research design and methodology are described. Section 4 presents our experimental results and findings, and Section 5 draws conclusions and makes suggestions for future research.
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