Toward a Receiver-Based Theory of Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Managers and researchers alike have sought new ways to address the challenges of sharing dispersed knowledge in modern business environments. Careful consideration by sharers of receivers' knowledge needs and behaviours may improve the effectiveness of knowledge sharing. This research examines how sharers react to their perceptions of receivers' knowledge needs and behaviours when making choices relating to sharing knowledge. The focus of this article is to propose and empirically explore a theoretical framework for a study of the role of the receiver in knowledge sharing — receiver-based theory. Data collected from two case studies highlight a key role played by perceived receiver knowledge needs and behaviours in shaping sharer choices when explicit knowledge is shared. A set of receiver influences on knowledge sharing is provided that highlights key receiver and sharer issues. The paper concludes that companies should develop better ways to connect potential sharers with receivers' real knowledge needs. Further, the findings suggest that sharing on a need-to-know basis hinders change in organisational power structures, and prevents the integration of isolated pockets of knowledge that may yield new value.

Keywords: knowledge sharing; receiver; sharer

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary perspectives on organisational knowledge sharing have so far largely overlooked a consideration of the role of the receivers of knowledge in shaping sharer choices (Dixon 2002; Hendriks 2004). Yet, it is the sharers and receivers of knowledge whose beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours will have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of knowledge sharing strategies and, cumulatively, on organisational learning and capabilities (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000; Hinds & Pfeffer, 2003; Husted & Michailova, 2002). For receivers to access, retrieve, comprehend, and assimilate a sharer’s knowledge, sharers must be aware and motivated, and share in skilled ways that meet receiver needs (Dixon, 2002). Hendriks has cautioned that “knowledge sharing is not seen as pushing packages of existing knowledge back and forth, but as a
process that requires not only knowledge of
the bringing party but also of the obtaining
party” (Hendriks, 2004, p. 6). However, to date,
there has not been sufficient exploration of
knowledge sharing at the unit level of the indi-
vidual in an organisational setting, where the
sharer and receiver may individually consider
one another, and how, in particular, feedback
from receivers may influence individual sharer
motivation and behaviour (Andrews &
Delahaye, 2000; Dixon, 2002; Hinds & Pfeffer,
2003).

Current evidence suggests the existence
of a relationship between receiver needs and
behaviour, and sharer motivation and
behaviour. First, a social relationship between
sharer and receiver is widely believed to moti-
vate sharing (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Second, the
availability of receivers may influence sharer
selection of communication channels (Straub
& Karahanna, 1998). Third, when related knowl-
edge is missing, receivers may experience learn-
ing difficulties (Dixon, 2002). Fourth, there may
be conflicting sharer and receiver agendas that
constrain knowledge sharing. On this point,
Easterby-Smith, Crossan, and Nicolini (2000)
 wrote “... the time is ripe to start addressing
learning and knowing in the light of inherent
conflicts between shareholders’ goals, eco-
nomic pressure, institutionalised professional
interest and political agendas” (p. 793).

In this paper, we develop and explore a
preliminary receiver-based theory of knowledge
sharing. This theory proposes that an impor-
tant aspect of understanding knowledge shar-
ing lies in understanding the potential role
played by receivers in shaping sharer choices.
The theory recasts the meaning of knowledge
sharing as a need for understanding and sup-
porting receiver knowledge needs based on
accurate receiver feedback given throughout
different stages of knowledge sharing. The
receiver-based theory of knowledge sharing
developed in this paper presents a micro-level
dialogical theory of knowledge sharing where
sharers are conscious of potential or present
receivers, in their sharing choices. It aims to
demonstrate how feedback from receivers at
different stages of the knowledge sharing pro-
cess can influence sharer perceptions of receiver
needs and shape sharer attitudes and
behaviours. In this paper, we focus particularly
on exploring the theory as it pertains to the
sharing of explicit knowledge.

CONTEMPORARY
PERSPECTIVES ON
KNOWLEDGE SHARING

A popular transformational view of
knowledge begins with codified observations
from a marketplace of data which, when placed
in a decision context, are transformed into in-
formation (Barabba & Zaltman, 1991). In the
analysis of this information, intelligence is cre-
a ted. When high levels of confidence are de-
veloped in a body of intelligence, knowledge is
created. Alavi and Leidner (1999) more broadly
suggest that “information becomes knowledge
once it is processed in the mind of an individual
(‘tacit’ knowledge in the words of Polanyi [1962]
and Nonaka [1994]). This knowledge then be-
comes information again (or what Nonaka re-
fers to as ‘explicit knowledge’) once it is articu-
lated or communicated to others in the form of
text, computer output, spoken, or written words
or other means” (p. 6). However, it is widely
believed that not all tacit knowledge is easily
explicated as explicit knowledge (e.g., Argote,
1999), and a process of socialisation has been
suggested by Nonaka (1994) as one way to pro-
mulgate such tacit knowledge. According to
Alavi and Leidner, explicit knowledge (informa-
tion) can be cognitively processed by an indi-
vidual receiver and internalised as tacit knowl-
edge (Alavi & Leidner, 1999). The researchers
note that a process of reflection, enlightenment
and learning is required for explicit knowledge
to become tacit in the mind of a receiver.

A strategy of knowledge sharing can en-
able an organisation to access and exploit its
dispersed knowledge assets (Argote, 1999). An
embracing conceptualisation of knowledge
sharing describes it as a complex process in-
volving the contribution of knowledge by the
organisation or its people, and the collection,
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