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 individual 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 motivate sharing (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Second, the availability of receivers may influence sharer selection of communication channels (Straub & Karahanna, 1998). Third, when related knowledge is missing, receivers may experience learning 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, economic 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 important aspect of understanding knowledge sharing 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 supporting receiver knowledge needs based on accurate receiver feedback given throughout the 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 process 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 information (Barabba & Zaltman, 1991). In the analysis of this information, intelligence is created. When high levels of confidence are developed 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 becomes information again (or what Nonaka refers to as ‘explicit knowledge’) once it is articulated 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 explicates 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 (information) can be cognitively processed by an individual receiver and internalised as tacit knowledge (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 enable an organisation to access and exploit its dispersed knowledge assets (Argote, 1999). An embracing conceptualisation of knowledge sharing describes it as a complex process involving the contribution of knowledge by the organisation or its people, and the collection,
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