Perceptions and Knowledge Sharing Practices of Graduate Students in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The concept of knowledge sharing is gaining popularity due to increased awareness and new initiatives in knowledge management. However, its implications in the educational arena have been relatively unexplored. The purpose of this study was to investigate perceptions, nature and extent of knowledge sharing among graduate students in Singapore. A questionnaire was used for data collection and 183 students from two public universities in Singapore participated in this study. The study revealed that the participants were primarily motivated to share knowledge in an attempt to build relationships with their peers and email was the preferred communication channel. However, intense competition among the students to outperform their classmates and the lack of depth in relationship were the two most cited factors hindering knowledge sharing. The study suggests that academic institutions should review their instruction approaches to make the learning process less competitive which would help improve knowledge sharing among students. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Barrier to Sharing; Graduate Students; Knowledge Sharing; Sharing Channels; Singapore

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the knowledge-based economy and the popularity of e-commerce initiatives have highlighted the need for effective exploitation of knowledge and making knowledge management an essential area of activity in organizations. Therefore, knowledge is now regarded as a precious resource for augmenting traditional factors of production (Chia, Kamdar, Nosworthy, & Chay, 2005). In fact, knowledge is increasingly viewed as a crucial determinant of an organization’s competitive advantage (Metaxiotis & Psarras, 2003) which can help organizations survive in a highly competitive, dynamic, and volatile environment. Among the knowledge management activities, the notion of knowledge sharing has generated much interest among academics and practitioners in recent years. Many studies have focused on investigating factors that influence various aspects of knowledge sharing,
although most of the studies were conducted in the context of business and public organizations. This is not surprising, given the fact that many of the knowledge management initiatives were initially implemented in these organizations. Although education institutions, to some extent, are different from business and public organizations, active information and knowledge sharing is also considered vital for the learning process. In general, problems attributed to the lack of knowledge sharing among students can also be studied on the same lines as in corporate and public organizations.

Factors Affecting Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is considered as a social behavior (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002), and many physical, technological, psychological, cultural, and personality factors either promote or inhibit this activity (Riege, 2005; Yuan, Fulk, & Shumate, 2005). Often, people feel pleased by helping others through sharing their knowledge because for them it is a satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful activity. Literature suggests that strong personal ties and mutual respect can motivate individuals to share knowledge with their peers. Droege and Hoobler (2003) highlighted that reciprocity together with trust promotes knowledge sharing. Alstyne (2005) agreed that trust is an important factor in developing positive interpersonal relationships which encourages knowledge sharing. Mutual trust is often developed over time through frequent interactions and that is why it is important that adequate time and opportunities should be provided for developing cordial relations.

Despite the immense benefits of knowledge sharing, as often advocated by researchers and practitioners, it is a fact that in many situations, people avoid sharing their knowledge. Davenport (1997) argued that the act of knowledge sharing is unnatural and there are plenty of reasons why people avoid sharing their knowledge. The lack of in-depth relationship between the source and recipient of knowledge, lack of motivation or rewards to share (Smith & McKeeen, 2003), lack of time, and nonexistence of knowledge sharing culture (Ikhsan & Ronald, 2004) are some of the factors that are likely to impede knowledge sharing among peers. In addition, lack of understanding as to what to share and with whom to share, limited appreciation for knowledge sharing, and the fear of providing wrong information can also hamper the knowledge sharing activity (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003; Skyrme, 2002).

Knowledge Sharing in Academic Institutions

Many studies have highlighted the fact that information and knowledge sharing plays an important role in the learning and development of individuals (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). In addition to lecturer-centric approaches, several new instruction strategies such as problem-oriented teaching, contextualized teaching, target-oriented teaching, and interactive and collaborative teaching are gaining popularity. These innovative teaching methods have already turned instruction into sharing (Hong & Kuo, 1999).

Grantham (2005) noted that many academic institutions are now emphasizing that their teaching staff incorporate group discussions, team projects, and other cooperative activities into their instruction approaches. These cooperative learning activities can bring many benefits such as better student achievements, improved communication skills, and a positive attitude towards knowledge sharing (Emmer & Gerwels, 2002). Similarly, teamwork can also help students emotionally in coping with the pressure of academic work, fulfilling personal needs and goals, and enhancing interpersonal relations (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). It can also assist students in seeking answers to their queries, learning new things, better understanding regarding a particular subject, or merely helping one another (Hogberg & Edvinsson, 1998). It is, therefore, quite evident that interaction and knowledge sharing among students is a vital component of their learning process.
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