Chapter XIV

Task Contingencies:
Examining if Two Heads are Always Better Than One

Abstract

This chapter investigates the value of social interaction in promoting people’s working knowledge and performance in decision making in relation to task complexity. The results of an empirical study undertaken indicate that social interaction was highly beneficial for enhancing people’s knowledge and performance of complex decision tasks. However, the results indicate that social interaction made no difference to people’s performance of simple decision tasks. These findings make two important contributions to the development of theory: they support the contingent nature of social interaction effects on decision-making knowledge and performance, and identify component task complexity as an important contingent factor.
Introduction

In Chapter XIII of this book, we discussed the enabler, the process, and the impact of socialisation and knowledge sharing in the context of decision making. From the significant positive effects found, one could conclude that knowledge sharing through socialisation is universally good knowledge-management practice that should always be encouraged.

According to Becerra-Fernandez, Gonzales, and Sabherwal (2004), much of the current literature on knowledge management promotes such universalistic view of knowledge management. In general, this view of knowledge management implies that there is one best way to manage knowledge in all organisations and under all circumstances. In contrast, a contingency view of knowledge management suggests that no one approach is best under all circumstances. Instead, individuals and organisations need to choose, among multiple possible paths, that one which fits best their set of circumstances. The assumption is that only the choice of the appropriate path will lead them to the ultimate success.

Drawing on previous theoretical and empirical research, Handzic (2004) suggested several contingency factors that influence knowledge management effort in the context of decision making. These include various decision tasks, decision environment, and decision maker characteristics. The author then used the gaming approach to knowledge management to explore how these contingency factors affected the effectiveness of various computer-based knowledge-management systems. Some of the major advantages of the gaming approach over other more conventional exploratory methods is that gaming allows for complex and realistic cases to be made, sequences of actions and events to be represented, and different players to be involved in the game, thus providing the variety of possible situations (De Hoog et al., 1999). Simulation games are considered particularly useful for conveying complex relationships to a knowledge worker, and for exploring what-if scenarios in an interactive format. The user can view and manipulate the parameters involved and observe the effect (Bergeron, 2003).

This chapter attempts to extend the author’s earlier work on contingent nature of technology-based knowledge management initiatives to socially-orientated ones. Given that various sources report between 40% and 90% of the needed knowledge in organisations as being tacit (e.g., AAOTE, 1998; Hewson, 1999), socially orientated mechanisms are particularly focused on promoting socialisation among people. It is argued that people’s behaviour and values contribute most to the circulation of tacit knowledge in organisations. The spiral knowledge model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) assumes that the processes of socialisation and knowledge sharing will result in the organisational amplification and exponential growth of working knowledge.

Given the early stage of knowledge management research, little is known about the actual success of socialisation and knowledge sharing initiatives, returns resulting...
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