An Investigation of the Impact of Intrinsic Motivation on Organizational Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Despite heavy investments in knowledge management systems, people are often reluctant to share their knowledge, with knowledge hoarding being one of the largest obstacles to effective knowledge management in organizations. This paper proposes a model that examines the role of intrinsic motivation in knowledge sharing. Bringing together insights from motivational research, Self-Determination Theory and the Theory of Reasoned Action, the study investigates the links between intrinsic motivators and knowledge sharing. Survey data collected from knowledge workers are analyzed using partial least squares. The results show self-efficacy, meaningfulness and impact are important motivators of attitude towards knowledge sharing, which in turn impacts intention to share knowledge. The findings provide insights into employee motivations to share knowledge, and strategies for enhancing knowledge sharing in organizations.

Keywords: Intrinsic Motivation, Knowledge Management Systems, Knowledge Sharing, Self-Determination Theory, Theory of Reasoned Action

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is considered one of the most important assets in organizations (Ipe, 2003; Levin & Cross, 2004), and is widely acknowledged as a key source of competitive advantage and as critical to the long-term sustainability and success of organizations (Gagné, 2009; Ipe, 2003). Companies that are able to manage their collective expertise and knowledge effectively are more likely to gain a competitive edge by being more innovative, efficient and effective in the marketplace (Levin & Cross, 2004).

Knowledge-based resources provide competitive advantage because they are difficult to imitate and are socially complex (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). However, practitioners claim that the largest hidden cost in organizations lies in underutilized knowledge (Sveiby & Simons, 2001).
2002). Organizations are therefore investing in knowledge management systems (KMS) to more effectively manage the knowledge they have (Ipe, 2003). Forrester Research (2010) in a survey of Enterprise and SMB Software in North America and Europe reported that more than 20% of small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) intend to implement CRM or information and knowledge management software in 2010 or later; this represents the fastest-growing SMB software markets. The investments that companies make in knowledge management systems to facilitate knowledge flows within organizations are therefore substantial. However, these systems by themselves cannot ensure that knowledge sharing will in fact take place (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Jennex & Olfman 2006).

People are not always willing to share their knowledge. This may be due to factors such as lack of trust, fear of loss of power, and fear of redundancy (Gagné, 2009; Ipe, 2003). Managers have also identified “a culture of hoarding knowledge” as one of the biggest obstacles to knowledge management (Sveiby & Simons, 2002, p. 421). Since knowledge sharing is critical for ensuring effective knowledge management systems, it is important for organizations to understand what encourages employees to share their knowledge with colleagues, and to then develop strategies that encourage sharing.

Research across different disciplines including organizational behavior, industrial psychology and organizational design, have emphasized the importance of individual-level motivation to address the problem of knowledge hoarding and deepen our understanding of employees’ knowledge sharing behavior (Bock & Kim, 2002; Jennex, 2008; Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007). Within the information systems (IS) discipline, researchers have also suggested that having a correct understanding of user motivations could enable managers to deploy appropriate strategies to encourage employees to use the systems that have been put in place (Malhotra & Galletta, 2004).

One of the most basic classifications of what motivates human behavior is the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71), where extrinsic motivation refers to the “performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome”, while intrinsic motivation refers to doing “an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself”. In knowledge management research the emphasis has been on extrinsic motivation (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005; Osterloh & Frey, 2000; Wah, Menkoff, Loh, & Evers, 2007). For example, Bock et al. (2005) found that anticipated extrinsic rewards and reciprocal relationships had a significant impact on knowledge sharing. Kankanhalli et al. (2005) found that organizational rewards, image and reciprocity were linked to use of a knowledge repository by knowledge contributors. Hsu and Lin (2008) also found that expectation of an enhanced reputation was linked to a more positive attitude towards using a blog to share knowledge.

Studies suggest that intrinsic motivation can lead to a different quality of experience and performance when compared with extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation has therefore emerged as an important concept, particularly in the context of voluntary and prosocial behaviors. Since knowledge sharing is considered a voluntary and prosocial behavior (Gagné, 2009) intrinsic motivation may be a key factor explaining knowledge sharing. However, only a few empirical studies have looked at the role of intrinsic motivation in knowledge sharing (Bock & Kim, 2002; Cabrera et al., 2006; Jennex, 2008; Lin, Lee, & Wang, 2009; Sie & Yakhlef, 2007; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). For example, Cabrera et al. (2006) and Lin et al. (2009) found that persons with high self-efficacy were more willing to share their knowledge, while Bock and Kim (2002) found that expected contribution had a positive effect on attitude towards knowledge sharing. Sie and Yakhlef (2007) also found that enthusiasm and passion were key motives for
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