Knowledge Sharing Barriers and Effectiveness at a Higher Education Institution

Omar E. M. Khalil, Kuwait University, Kuwait
Timothy Shea, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, USA

ABSTRACT

In most of today’s academic circles, faculty knowledge is rarely shared with colleagues in the same institution in any meaningful or systematic way. This investigation sought answers to two questions regarding the faculty’s perceived knowledge sharing (KS) barriers and the influence that KS barriers may have on KS effectiveness. A data set was collected from seventy-six faculty members. The analysis revealed four key KS barriers, as bounded individual capacity is the most perceived barrier to KS, followed by inadequate organizational capability, fear of knowledge revelation, and knowledge nature. Fear of knowledge revelation was found to be the most influential barrier on KS effectiveness, as it influences three of the four KS effectiveness measures, namely awareness of research activities in one’s department, sharing of research knowledge with others in the institution, and satisfaction with sharing research knowledge with others in the institution. These findings contribute to the growing empirical KS research and provide an appropriate foundation for decision making and policy formulation aiming at fostering KS effectiveness in academe.

Keywords: Higher Education, Individual Barriers, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Sharing, Organizational Barriers

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is a knowledge industry, as higher education institutions essentially engage in the creation, distribution, and adding value to knowledge (Norris et al., 2003; Oliver et al., 2003). They are striving to maintain their position in a fast-changing world. There is also a growing recognition that knowledge management (KM) can enable higher education to evolve more smoothly to a highly interactive and dynamic educational environment (Robson et al., 2003). Nevertheless, as many of today’s leading business organizations, higher education institutions do not leverage knowledge and knowledge service (Norris et al., 2006).

Faculty members are active creators of knowledge, and the challenge for higher education institutions is to get faculty to reflect on the nature of knowledge and how it can be understood and shared (Norris et al., 2003; Buckley & Toit, 2010). On most of today’s campuses, knowledge exists in separate, vertical silos. Although they use the best available practices
enabled by leading-edge technologies, there is little systematic sharing of learning content, context, and supporting materials among academics (Norris et al., 2006). Knowledge is hardly disbursed and rarely crosses disciplinary boundaries, as it mainly resides in archipelagos of individual knowledge clusters that are unavailable for systematic sharing (Norris et al., 2003).

If knowledge is power, shared knowledge is real power (Jayalakshmi, 2006). Knowledge sharing (KS) is also the backbone of the four knowledge creation processes (i.e., socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization) identified in the SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Barriers to KS would, therefore, impede the leverage and accumulation of the intellectual assets of an organization. Nevertheless, efforts aiming at enhancing KS among faculty must be guided by evidence on the barriers that may hamper that sharing. Although a number of earlier studies attempted to explore knowledge management (KM) practice in higher education institutions (e.g., Petrides & Nodine, 2002; Arntzen et al., 2009; Sohail & Daud, 2009; Tian et al., 2009), the KM literature, in general, is short in evidence from the field on faculty’s KS practice and barriers in such institutions, where knowledge occupies a central and pervasive place.

This research explores the barriers that may impede the effective sharing of research-related knowledge among faculty at a USA-based higher education institution. More specifically, it attempts to answer two questions: (1) what are the perceived barriers to KS among the faculty in the investigated institution? and (2) do the perceived KS barriers influence the effectiveness of sharing research-related knowledge among the faculty in the investigated institution?

The remainder of this paper is organized accordingly. The research background is described next, followed by the research methodology, research results, discussion of the research results, research implications, limitations and future research, and the paper ends with conclusions.

**BACKGROUND**

Knowledge is a social construct. It exists in tacit and explicit forms, which are complementary and symbiotic. Innovation can occur only when explicit and tacit knowledge interact (Nonaka, 1994; Norris et al., 2006). While people can understand information individually and in isolation, knowledge can be only understood in a context of interactivity and communication with others (Norris et al., 2003).

Although researchers have defined KS differently depending on their views of the term and their research purposes (e.g., Lee, 2001; Bock & Kim, 2002; MacNeil, 2003; Ryu et al., 2003; Lin & Lee, 2004; Yi, 2009), KS is basically the exchange of different types of knowledge between individuals, groups, units, and organizations. KS is about connection, not collection, and connection is ultimately a personal choice (Dougherty, 1999). Knowledge can be shared through different mechanisms, depending on the nature of the knowledge itself. KS can occur explicitly when an individual or a unit communicates with another individual or another unit, or implicitly through norms and routines. KS includes not only the transmission (sending) of knowledge but also the absorption of the knowledge by the receiver.

Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) postulate that knowledge mobilization is a key task that organizations must perform. However, knowledge is to some extent complex and contextual and hard to transfer. It cannot be easily shared even when individuals intend or wish to share it. Norris et al. (2003) posit that many academics and educators are unreflective about the nature of knowledge outside their immediate domains of interest. They hold some types of knowledge in high regard and highly respect personalized knowledge that they have accumulated over time. Therefore, academic knowledge may mainly remain a “cottage industry” which makes it rather difficult to share with others.

Yet, the KM literature suggests that KS barriers vary from individual to organizational to technological. As to the individual barriers, Yoo and Torrey (2002) postulate that KS
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