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An Investigation of the Motivators and Effects of Formalized Knowledge Sharing at the Workplace: A Qualitative Approach

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Extended Abstract

Current empirical research and organizational efforts have revealed the significance in comprehending and promoting knowledge management (KM) and the knowledge sharing that ensues from it (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Leidner, 1998; Prusak, 2000; Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Knowledge sharing has been identified as a key enabler of KM and can be viewed as the interactive, people-to-people dissemination of knowledge between and among individuals and groups (Davenport, 1998). In fact, information sharing within organizations has been implemented for several years now, especially enabled by the concepts of total quality management and the new organization (Drucker, 1988). In Geus and Senge (1997), Senge succinctly highlights the notion and importance of sharing knowledge in enabling a rich and fulfilling work life.

Yet, little empirical research has actually been conducted on knowledge sharing, particularly from the viewpoint of the individuals who share knowledge and the environments and mechanisms that are conducive to formalized knowledge sharing. A formalized setting is one where the knowledge sharing does not occur through serendipity (e.g., water cooler conversations) or through personal networks. Rather, an employee seeking information utilizes a formal organizational tool or process such as a community of practice, training session, mentoring, or rotation to enable knowledge sharing.

The crux of this study is to understand a crucial human behavior within the work environment – the knowledge sharing behavior (KSB). In trying to understand this behavior, it is important to investigate what motivates it and what its effects are on the person displaying the behavior. One would expect that "sharers" perceive tangible and intangible effects from the KSB's they display. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides a framework that explains human behavior in terms of the tangible/intangible effects it produces. In the KM context, SLT helps explains KSB's through the continuous interaction between the person, his environment, and the behavior. It posits that response consequences (e.g., enhanced personal knowledgebase, gratification, bonuses) affect the chance that an individual will display a KSB again in a given situation. Further, these response consequences of the behavior are instrumental in the individual forming expectations of the outcomes of their behavior. Using this theory, this study investigates the perceived cognitive (i.e., how it affects one's personal knowledgebase), affective (i.e., how it affects one's feelings), social (i.e., how it affects one's social work life), and tangible effects (e.g., monetary rewards or enhancement of tools) of formalized knowledge sharing on the sharer.

Using a multi-case-study approach, data were gathered via 60 in-depth interviews conducted at two fortune 500 companies. A typical interview began with a short introduction to the expectations and goals of the study. The respondent was then asked to describe a knowledge sharing experience he/she had (as the sharer) that stood out in his/her mind as being positive. Next, motivators of the particular knowledge sharing experience described were elicited. Then, "effects on the sharer" were elicited along two major themes: perceived cognitive/affective effects of knowledge sharing and perceived social/tangible effects of knowledge sharing. For the affective effects question, a pre-determined list of potential feelings was provided to the respondent with the option of adding feelings that were absent on the list. All of the remaining questions were completely open-ended. Several probes for depth, clarity and completeness were conducted throughout the interview. The respondent was then asked to describe a knowledge sharing experience that stood out in his/her mind as being negative (if one had occurred). Questions were then asked to elicit the motivators and effects of the negative knowledge sharing experience and these were similar to the questions asked for the positive sharing incident. The respondent was given a lot of leeway to describe effects that were not necessarily addressed by SLT. The interview culminated by having the respondent describe what he/she perceived to be his/her overall motivators/de-

motivators for sharing knowledge at the workplace. The interview data will be analyzed using the analytical framework as delineated by Miles and Huberman (1994).

In seeking the motivators of such a behavior, the study will provide a much-needed understanding of knowledge sharing, thereby, extending and informing research conducted in the area of KM. In providing an understanding of how knowledge sharing affects the sharer, this study can provide a deeper understanding of how realistic it is for employees to participate in KM tools/processes while continuing to do their regular job tasks. This could be used in practice by organizations to improve the work life of employees. Understanding the motivators and effects of formalized knowledge sharing system better can lead to the development of more effective reward mechanisms. Further, we will better understand what knowledge sharing tools/processes are and their impact on the lives of the sharers.

Keywords: Knowledge management, knowledge sharing, social learning theory, motivators, effects

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