Knowledge Sharing – Types of Knowledge Shared and Rewards

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to better understand how the types of knowledge shared and how knowledge sharing is influenced by job expectations and rewards. A qualitative method approach was adopted to gather data. Participants generally shared knowledge because that was the behavior expected of them by their organizations. The types of knowledge shared were practical knowledge and book knowledge. Factors that led participants to share or not share knowledge included personal benefit and the expectation of reciprocity. Knowledge sharing research is of importance to the fields of adult, continuing, extension and community education for a number of reasons. Public and private organizations’ competencies are rooted in the knowledge of its members, the organization’s employees. Organizations appear to be more productive when they can successfully create an environment in which employees share knowledge and when the knowledge shared is actually used by the recipients of information. Therefore, it is important to understand the type of knowledge shared, and how expectations created by an organization influence knowledge sharing among its members.

Introduction

Knowledge has been recognized both as an important organizational resource and a source of competitive advantage (e.g., Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). To gain a competitive advantage, knowledge and expertise must be transferred from experts to those who, within an organization, need it (Hinds, Patterson, & Pfeffer, 2001). Knowledge sharing between employees allows organizations to capitalize on the expertise of its employees (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

While numerous issues related to knowledge sharing such as motivation (e.g., Hansen, Mors, & Lovas, 2005) have been extensively investigated in the literature, little is known about possible differences in the type or quality of knowledge shared in organizations where employees consider knowledge sharing a behavior not included in their job descriptions (extra-role behavior) versus others where employees see knowledge sharing as an in-role behavior that is expected to be rewarded (Wang & Noe, 2010). Knowledge sharing research is of importance to the fields of adult, continuing, extension and community education for a number of reasons. Public and private organizations’ competencies are rooted in the knowledge of its members, the organization’s employees (Dougherty, 1995). Organizations appear to be more productive when they can successfully create an environment in which employees share knowledge and when the knowledge shared is actually used by the recipients of information (Quigley, Tesluk, Locke & Bartol, 2007). Therefore, it is important to understand how expectations created by an organization influence knowledge sharing among its members. The purpose of this study is to better understand how knowledge sharing is influenced by job expectations and rewards.

The following research study addresses three questions: the type and quality of knowledge shared when knowledge is considered an in-role behavior; the type and quality of knowledge shared when knowledge is considered an extra-role behavior; and whether knowledge sharing is influenced by job expectations and rewards.
Theoretical Framework

Knowledge sharing: “Knowledge sharing refers to the provision of task information and know-how to help others and to collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures” (Wang & Noe, 2010, p. 117). Individuals share information relevant to the organization, and expertise with one another (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002).

Since knowledge sharing is a deliberate behavior, the theory of planned behavior is appropriate framework for this study (Gagné, 2009). The theory of planned behavior, intentions are influenced by three factors: (1) one’s disposition toward a behavior or the extent to which the behavior is beneficial or detrimental; (2) the perceived social pressure to engage or not in a behavior; and people’s beliefs about their abilities, resources, and opportunity to engage in a behavior (Gagné, 2009). According to Bock and Kim (2002), individuals’ attitudes about knowledge sharing are influenced by their beliefs about expected rewards. Smith and McKeen (2003) found that the existence of a reward system increases workers’ motivation to engage in knowledge sharing.

Methods

This study used a qualitative method to gather data. This approach was appropriate because the study did not seek to prove or disprove a hypothesis or generalize data. Rather, the goal of the study was to gain some understanding of the individuals’ perception of knowledge sharing. An 11-question interview protocol was developed, asking participants about their experiences of knowledge sharing in their work environment. The interview questions were developed based on the knowledge sharing literature. The researcher used a semi-structured interview format where questions were focused on issues relevant to the research questions. Three individuals were interviewed for this study. Participants volunteered and gave their permission for the interview to be audio-recorded. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for themes. The coding scheme was not predetermined but rather, emerged from the data analysis. Participants reviewed transcripts for accuracy. In order to explore the types of knowledge shared, Hara and Hew’s (2007) framework was utilized. The knowledge shared by individuals could be book knowledge, practical knowledge, and cultural knowledge (Hara & Hew, 2007).

Findings

This section focuses on the results and discusses their relevance to the three research questions. Three individuals volunteered to share their experience of knowledge sharing within their respective organizations. Several themes emerged from the analysis.

In-role and Extra-role Knowledge Sharing

All participants regularly share knowledge at work, generally because it is expected of them. Two participants indicated that sharing knowledge was vital to their organization. For instance, they indicated “We wouldn’t be able to go through the day if we didn’t share information”. Another stated, “It’s important that we’re informed across the board because if we don’t know a patient’s medical history, it can have a negative effect on that patient”. However,
except in one case, most knowledge sharing activities seemed to be in-role behavior. Indeed, in most situation described by the participants, information was shared either because it was “strongly encouraged” by management. “There is an encouragement to share the knowledge so we’re all on the same page and the diagnoses that we’re giving are known across the board”. Another participant has to meet every day at the end of the day to share information about how the day went.

The participants shared knowledge for a number of reasons. The main reasons here seem to be willingness to help (2) without expecting anything in return and (2) because it would benefit the person providing the information. Indeed, one of the participants made the following statement: “For example there’s one kid who told myself and another program aide that he has anger problems and that he has been in trouble before. When he told me that I shared that information with the rest of the staff”. Another indicated “I was willing to share information because she was new and I knew that ultimately, down the line, the more knowledge she had, the easier all of our jobs would be because there would be more people qualified to do the same task. My helping her in the beginning would benefit myself and everybody else.” The individuals will not, however, go out of their way to share information. One participants would help coworkers only if it did not take too much time away from his own responsibilities: “So we try to help each other out as much as possible but not too much or too long because, depending on what activity we are doing, we cannot stay away from our [kid] for too long”.

Two out of three participants were willing to share knowledge with coworkers without expecting anything in return. Additionally, those participants appeared to work within teams that were tight-knit. This might be explained by the fact that they did not work in a competitive environment. The third participant was reluctant to share mainly because of the perceived lack of reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge. Even when knowledge sharing was strongly encouraged, it was not always actually done in practice, leading one of the participants not to go above and beyond the organizations expectations. This participant explained that some of her coworkers were reluctant to share information, even when asked by supervisors: “Some people will hold information to make themselves look better versus making everybody look good. Some people share information and some people don’t. For instance, there was a coworker who knew a lot about running the software we run for our tests and we would ask him to share but he would be reluctant to, so that he would be the only source of information and make himself look better”. This finding supports by prior research. According to Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006), there is a positive relationship between reciprocity and knowledge sharing.

**Type and Quality of Knowledge Shared**

Analysis of the types of knowledge shared revealed that the participants share all three types of knowledge – book knowledge, practical knowledge, and cultural knowledge – in their place of work. Practical knowledge came first (majority of the knowledge shared by two of the subjects), followed by book knowledge (one participant). “Most knowledge is acquired as we go. (…) I have the educational knowledge but most of the other aides learned through experience”. A second participant pointed out that she “had about a 50% knowledge of what [she] was getting into. The other 50% was obtained on the job”. Typical practical knowledge shared was tips on how to accomplish a task more efficiently. “An instructor with more experienced shared with me a Word document she had, listing the most common errors encountered in some assignments, as well as how to address them. When I graded my first papers, all I had to do was copy and paste
information from that tip list and tailor it to the specific student. That saved me a significant amount of time.”

The relatively low amount of book knowledge shared overall is not surprising given that all participants have been at their position for a number of years. Moreover, little experienced is required prior to being hired where two of the participants work. This fact might explain why more practical knowledge is shared overall in the participants’ work. The third participant holds a more technical job where some amount of book knowledge is required there. That could explain why up to 50% of the knowledge shared there is book knowledge.

**Knowledge Sharing and Job Expectations**

When asked about their expectation before starting their current jobs, two out of three participants indicated they knew what to do in their job. “When I started the job I knew what I was supposed to do. They gave us information. (…) Expectations were spot on. Everything I was told before I began the job was pretty much accurate compared to when I was on site”. One of the participants, however, had a different experience. This subject indicated that the job description she was given was very vague; therefore, her expectations for job were low. The subject did, however, receive all the assistance she needed from her office mates. “My office mates were very nice to me. They volunteered information, gave me tips, and inside information about the organization. This sped my adaptation to the new job”.

The lack of influence of knowledge sharing on job expectations might be explained by the fact that participants, for the most part, knowledgeable about the position they were ready to start.

**Knowledge Sharing and Rewards**

Knowledge sharing activities were not formally incorporated in the participants’ evaluations. The first participation indicated “Knowledge sharing somewhat incorporated in the informal evaluation. (…) There are no rewards for knowledge sharing except for the occasional verbal recognition for a good job”. There were no formal reward systems in the organizations where the participants work. According to another participant, “Sharing knowledge is considered in the evaluation but it’s not as much of an issue because it has become an understanding now across the board that we’re on a team and that knowledge is spread across the board so that everybody’s job is easier”.

**Conclusions / Recommendations**

The findings in this study suggest that participants generally share knowledge because it is what the organization expects of them (in-role behavior). The main type of knowledge shared is practical knowledge, followed by book knowledge. Participants shared knowledge to comply with the rules, and because it would benefit them as well.

One limitation of the current study is the number of participants, and the lack of organizations with a formal reward system in place. Despite the limitations, we believe the study was useful in identify the types of knowledge shared and providing and insight on the motivations to share knowledge.

Future studies should be done with a broader sample, as well as different types of organizations.
References


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