



Looking for motivational routes for employee-generated innovation: Employees' scouting behavior

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of employees' job and organizational engagement on their scouting behavior, which refers to employees' voluntary communicative efforts to acquire and circulate task and managerial information. The study investigates the causal networks between employees' creative work engagement, intrinsic motivation, empowering leadership, and quality of organization-employee relationship, as well as their influence on employee scouting. A web-based survey of 306 current employees working full-time at a semi-conductor company in Italy explored the antecedents of the employees' communicative behavior of scouting. Results suggest that employees who are motivated to be creative for their job are likely to engage in scouting behavior. Those who perceive empowering leadership and a high quality of relationship with their company also turned out to be engaged actively in scouting, and relative impacts of job and organizational engagement on scouting were also found. Theoretical and practical implications for future research are discussed.

1. Introduction

It has been largely believed that innovation comes primarily from an organization's systematic investment in technology or research and development (R&D) functions (Sauermaun & Cohen, 2010). However, given that the word *innovation* is a combination of *in* and *nova*, which means *new*, and refers to the idea that new things originate from the inside, innovation could also derive from the internal processes or issues occurring within an organization. Specifically, the behaviors of employees, one of the strategic constituencies of an organization, can be key factors in bringing about innovation within an organization (Kim, 2012). In this sense, a specific call for research on employees' communicative behaviors (ECBs) in terms of theory and practice has arisen (Beiser, 2016; Ketchum & USC Annenberg Strategic Communication & PR Center, 2009; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2010). Recognizing the strategic importance of employees' communicative behaviors for organizational effectiveness and innovation, Kim and Rhee (2011) introduced the concept of *scouting*, defined as employees' voluntary and effortful communicative action to seek out and bring relevant information to the organization. It includes not only information encountered during the employees' formal and informal interactions with organizational strategic constituencies, but also the

sharing and forwarding of information within the organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

The more employees an organization has who engage in active information acquiring and sharing behavior, the more opportunities it has to achieve innovation through information selectively shared by employees (Park, Kim, & Krishna, 2014). Viewing scouting behavior as individuals' problem-solving actions in the workplace (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Rhee, 2011), there exists high conceptual convergence between scouting and employees' creativity, which have been extensively discussed as successful employee management outcomes in human resources and management literature. In essence, employees who are cognitively motivated and engaged to be creative bring extra values and maintain competitive advantages in a dynamic business environment (George & Zhou, 2007; Zhou & George, 2001).

In addition to individuals' capacity to be creative for their work, perceived support at an organizational level is another critical factor in encouraging employees to engage in communicative action. From the viewpoint of applied communication research, building a good relationship with internal publics has been emphasized as a key factor of organization effectiveness (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). To determine what leads employees to generate and circulate valuable information about their organization that produces

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innovation, several researchers have taken a relationship-based approach (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2017; Park et al., 2014). Moreover, the role of leadership has also been emphasized in motivating employees to communicate. The presence of empowering leaders, in particular, has turned out to facilitate individuals' problem solving and knowledge sharing, through leaders' participatory decision making, informing, and coaching behaviors (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006).

Despite its importance in terms of understanding the effect of employees' communicative behaviors on organizational effectiveness and innovation, as well as the impacts of antecedents at different levels (e.g., organizational, individual), scouting behavior has not yet been systematically approached in literature. In order to ascertain its theoretical power and demonstrate its practical utility and value for strategic management, this study aims to explore several antecedents that affect employees' scouting behavior. In building a model that links employees' scouting behavior and its antecedents in a comprehensive way, the present study draws upon employees' engagement parameters both in individual (e.g., intrinsic motivation of creativity, creative process engagement) and organizational or managerial levels (e.g., organization-employee relationship, empowering leadership).

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic importance of employees' communicative behaviors (ECBs)

Recognizing the importance of employees' behaviors for organizational performance, scholars across the disciplines including business, human resources, and communication management have tried to conceptualize these behaviors from different perspectives. For example, Van Dyne, Ang, and Botero (2003) and Morrison (2014) conceptualized employee voice and silence behaviors as having multiple dimensions, acknowledging employees' different motivations to withhold or express ideas, information, and opinions about work-related improvements. Organization citizenship behavior (OCB) was described as employees' voluntary commitment and helping behaviors within an organization (Organ, 1988). In terms of marketing and internal branding, in-role and extra-role employee brand-building behaviors (EBBBs) have also been associated with organizational effectiveness (Liu, Ko, & Chapleo, 2017). These concepts commonly highlighted employees' motivation or actions to change internal systems or organizational governance.

From a different perspective, applied communication scholars have examined employees' behaviors in terms of information processing and exchanging within an organization. Practitioners' environmental scanning behavior has been discussed extensively, defined as “the gathering of information about publics, about reactions of publics toward the organization, and about public opinion toward issues important to the organization” (Dozier, 1986, p. 1). Accordingly, formal and systematic scanning procedures by experts within an organization have long been regarded as effective organizational management, in that they provide valuable information about stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). However, recently, pointing out that non-specialist members—employees—can also enact environmental scanning roles to circulate valuable information within an organization, Kim and Rhee (2011) conceptualized the scouting behavior of employees. *Scouting* refers to employees' voluntary communication efforts to acquire relevant information on management tasks and other related issues, without benefit to themselves, and to bring this information to the organization and share it with other members. Kim and Rhee (2011) and Lee and Kim (2017) particularly emphasized that these communicative behaviors of information seeking, sharing, and forwarding can be facilitated by the quality of the relationship between an organization and its employees. Subsequently, Park et al. (2014) first attempted to define a connection between scouting behavior and innovation, and found that an organization becomes more innovative and adaptive to its environment as it motivates employees to engage in voluntary intrapreneurship

through relationship building.

As Zhang and Bartol (2010) noted, innovation in an organization can be encouraged and facilitated by “information.” We argue in this study that this information is mainly acquired by employees' formal and informal daily communicative behaviors. That is, the more an organization's employees voluntarily seek out, select, and bring in valuable information and knowledge about the products, services, operational processes, and even the possible issues of their organization, the more innovation can be achieved and acted upon. This information is often of good quality because employees tend to capture, interpret, and acquire such information based on their job-related knowledge and experience through formal or informal conversations (Park et al., 2014). Therefore, in order to maximize opportunities for innovation by securing strategic organization-related information through employees, it is critical for organizations to track the motivational routes of what causes individuals to become active in scouting behavior.

Saks (2006) maintained that there is a meaningful difference between organizational engagement and job engagement. Individuals may behave based on different perceptions, either from themselves or from perceived behaviors of their organization. To understand what motivates employees to engage in scouting, and to develop an exploratory model for it as a communicative behavior, this study specifically considers 1) perceived managerial efforts of an organization as organizational engagement and 2) individuals' creativity in the workplace as job engagement, both as key predictors of employees' communicative action.

2.2. Motivations for scouting: organizational efforts

Since scouting behavior is conceptualized as the acquisition and transmission of “organization-related” information, this study suggests two managerial factors for encouraging employees' information behavior: organization-employee relationship (OER) and empowering leadership.

2.2.1. Organization-employee relationship

As a critical communication outcome, the relationship between an organization and its strategic constituencies has been discussed and tested by applied communication scholars (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Huang, 2001; Jo, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2007; Kim, 2007). A widely discussed concept of this is based on Hon and Grunig's (1999) study, which suggested four indicators of relationship quality between an organization and its publics: trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. *Trust* refers to one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open itself to the other party, and includes three dimensions: integrity, dependability, and competence. *Control mutuality* indicates the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence others. *Commitment* is the extent to which each party believes that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote. The last component, *satisfaction*, is defined as the extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other as positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced (Hon & Grunig, 1999). It has been particularly emphasized that organization-public relationship is an indicator of organizational effectiveness, and plays a critical role in shaping and maintaining the reputation of a company (Grunig & Hung, 2002).

Recently, an increasing number of scholars have attempted to explore the relationship between an organization and its employees, using the four indicators above (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee, 2017; Men, 2014; Men & Stacks, 2014). For example, Men and Stacks (2014) defined an organization-employee relationship as “the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other” (p. 307). In relation to employees' communicative behaviors, previous studies have found that perceived good relationships with organizations significantly increased employees'

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