



Understanding the climate–knowledge sharing relation: The moderating roles of intrinsic motivation and job autonomy



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ABSTRACT

A cooperative organizational climate is often argued to promote knowledge-sharing behaviors among employees. However, research indicates that managerial interventions aimed at shaping the organizational climate can be difficult to execute. We develop and test a contingency model of intrinsic motivation and job autonomy as moderators of this relationship. We find that the social climate for cooperation better predicts knowledge sharing when employees show low levels of intrinsic motivation and have high levels of job autonomy. This suggests that a cooperative climate and intrinsic motivation are substitutes with respect to their impact on knowledge-sharing behaviors, while climate and job autonomy are complements. We find support for these ideas in data gathered from a sample of 170 employees of a knowledge-intensive firm.

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1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, the argument that knowledge is the primary locus of organizations' competitive advantage has become highly influential (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Kapoor & Adner, 2012; Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010). As a consequence, the interest on how knowledge is manifested in organizations has dramatically increased, and the issue of how processes related to the creation, transfer and use of knowledge between members in organizations can be governed has been placed on the agenda of the human resource management (HRM) literature (Foss & Michailova, 2009; Galunic, Sengupta, & Petriglieri, 2014). The extant literature offers examples regarding how managerial interventions can influence employees' engagement in knowledge sharing activities. In particular it has been suggested that aspects such as flexible work practices or performance management systems (Minbaeva, 2008) may influence the degree of employees' knowledge sharing. However, our knowledge of how such interventions can be designed and implemented remains quite

rudimentary. In this study, we address this knowledge gap by increasing our understanding of the governance of intra-organizational knowledge sharing behaviors. Specifically, we propose that knowledge sharing can be partly explained as a combination of three interrelated aspects: cooperative climate, intrinsic motivation and job autonomy.

Knowledge sharing has been positively linked to the creation of new products and services (Smith, Collins, & Clark, 2005; Zhou & Li, 2012), the transfer of best organizational practices (Pallotti, Tubaro, & Lomi, 2015; Szulanski, 1996) and the development of competitive advantage (Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Knowledge management scholars have dedicated considerable attention to the antecedents of knowledge-sharing behavior, often in the form of some combination of environmental factors and individual characteristics (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Mueller, 2014).

A important aspect in promoting intra-organizational knowledge sharing is the cooperative climate in the organization (Černe, Nerstad, Dysvik, & Škerlavaj, 2014; Kettinger, Li, Davis, & Kettinger, 2015), defined as the "organizational norms that emphasize personal effort toward group outcomes or tasks as opposed to individual outcomes" (Collins & Smith, 2006). Scholars have argued that organizations can effectively influence knowledge sharing through different HRM practices and architectures (Minbaeva, Mäkelä, & Rabbiosi, 2012). However, such practices are often particularly difficult to implement due to the discretionary nature

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of knowledge sharing, the difficulties associated to monitoring and formal rewarding as well as the potential crowding-out effects of managerial interventions (Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinholdt, 2009; Osterloh & Frey, 2000).

Little research has empirically explored how individual attributes may moderate the influence of a cooperative climate in knowledge sharing (Bogaert, Boone, & van Witteloostuijn, 2012). This is relevant for knowledge management given that shaping the cooperative climate of a particular organization often requires significant investments in the form of managerial and employee time and effort (Collins & Smith, 2006), as the “climate of the organization is very difficult to change” (Schneider, Brief, & Guzzo, 1996 p. 4). For example, given that employees within organizations are heterogeneous with respect to their work-related attitudes, motives, behaviors and values (Grant & Rothbard, 2013), it may be that some of those attributes make a cooperative climate less needed for them to share knowledge. Or, jobs can be designed so as to exert the same influence on knowledge sharing as a cooperative climate.

In this study, we propose that the cooperative climate-knowledge sharing relation is contingent on two factors: intrinsic motivation and job autonomy. Both aspects have been addressed in earlier work as direct antecedents of knowledge sharing (Gagné, 2009; Pee & Lee, 2015), but not as moderators. Since intrinsic motivation is not fully determined by the social context (Ryan & Deci, 2000), employees exposed to a similar social climate may differ in their intrinsic motivation. Following this logic, we build the argument that organizations where employees are intrinsically motivated will not necessarily demand a cooperative climate to promote knowledge sharing. We also discuss whether management can enhance the positive effects of a cooperative climate by providing more autonomy to employees. Job autonomy has been found to be a direct predictor of cooperative behaviors among employees such as knowledge sharing (Gagné, 2003). Departing from these insights, in this paper we argue that employees who have more job autonomy will also face more opportunities to engage in knowledge sharing activities. That implies that in organizations with a high cooperative climate, job autonomy will potentially boost knowledge sharing behaviors.

In sum, we add to the literature on the management and governance of intra-organizational knowledge sharing by examining the potential contingent effects of intrinsic motivation and job autonomy. We test our hypotheses on a sample of 170 employees from a knowledge-intensive firm, and we discuss directions for future research and managerial implications.

2. Theory and hypotheses development

2.1. HRM practices and knowledge sharing

Given that the effectiveness of formal mechanisms to encourage knowledge sharing has been called into question, researchers have turned to the informal processes such as trust (Casimir, Lee, & Loon, 2012; Collins & Smith, 2006), teamwork (He, Baruch, & Lin, 2014; Smith et al., 2005) or fairness (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005) as catalyzers of knowledge sharing between organizational members. Relatedly, research has recently recognized the importance of a cooperative climate in fostering knowledge sharing (Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007).

Several theoretical mechanisms may be invoked to explain the causal link between cooperative climate and knowledge sharing. According to a social psychological view, interactions among employees are likely to create descriptive norms of behavior (Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004). Consequently, a cooperative climate can be

conceived of as a source of descriptive norms to behave in a cooperative manner. Furthermore, a cooperative climate implies social exchanges among organizational members and thus, employees may show a tendency to “pay back” their colleagues’ cooperative behavior by engaging in knowledge sharing. Finally, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that when employees are part of a cooperative climate, their comparisons of themselves with other members will result in a greater tendency to behave in a cooperative manner.

When researchers primarily explain employees’ knowledge-sharing behavior as a consequence of the social climate of the organization, they implicitly assume employee homogeneity with respect to how employees respond to contextual variations. However, the heterogeneity of individuals (in terms of values or traits) have fundamental implications for their response to contextual features (Felin & Hesterly, 2007). As employees within organizations are heterogeneous with respect to their work-related attitudes, motives, behaviors and values (Grant & Rothbard, 2013). HRM interventions to shape the organizational climate towards a cooperative one should take such heterogeneity into account. Research on the moderating role of individual-level variables is needed to better assess the consequences of interventions aimed at influence the cooperative climate. In the following section, we introduce two variables that represent sources of heterogeneity in the way that employees respond to a cooperative climate.

2.2. The moderating role of intrinsic motivation

Research on motivation shows that the desire to “make an effort” can derive from various sources. Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a theoretical framework that allows for the differentiation of behaviors with respect to how self-motivated and volitional they are. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the desire to expend effort on a certain task based on an interest in and enjoyment of the task itself (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When they are intrinsically motivated, employees decide to expend effort based on personal enjoyment rather than based on external forces, such as being told what to do or because of the promise of a reward (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014). Recent research has recognized intrinsic motivation as an important driver to share knowledge with colleagues (Bock et al., 2005; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005).

Although SDT scholars note that the emergence of intrinsic motivation may be supported by certain contextual characteristics, they emphasize that it is the nature of the activity *per se* what determines the emergence of intrinsically motivated behaviors. In fact, when individuals feel that contextual factors are pushing them towards certain behaviors, their intrinsic motivation towards that specific behavior tends to decrease (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Employees that are intrinsically motivated are process-focused and see the work as an end in and of itself. For this reason, when intrinsic motivation is high, employees will enjoy the process of performing the task and their behavior will be less determined by the contextual characteristics and more by the nature of the activity to be performed. We extend this rationale to argue that employees differ in their natural tendency to share knowledge with others, that is, in their intrinsic motivation to engage in knowledge sharing. Hence, we propose that employees with higher levels of intrinsic motivation towards knowledge sharing will be less influenced by a cooperative climate on their decision to share knowledge because their behavior is mainly process-focused and less contingent on external factors. In other words, intrinsic motives to share knowledge may be viewed as a reflection of internal dispositions towards the activity itself rather than a response to a given set of contextual

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