Comparing normative influences as determinants of knowledge continuity

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to identify factors influencing knowledge continuity (KC), the passing of knowledge from a departing employee to his or her successor. Considering the perspectives of both the departing employee and the successor, we examine how employee perceptions of KC quality are affected by two normative influences: organizational knowledge management (KM) culture, and the KM behavior of the employee's current supervisor. Data were collected from 44 departing employees (who transitioned to new jobs) and their 44 successors, up to 6 months following job transition. Participants were full-time engineers employed in a large high- technology firm in Israel. The extent to which departing employees perceived the organization as fostering KM culture, and the extent to which they perceived their current supervisors as engaging in KM behavior, were, respectively, negatively and positively associated with KC quality as perceived by successors. Successors' perceived organizational KM culture was positively related to their perceptions of KC quality. Successors' perceptions of their own supervisors' KM behavior were not significantly associated with their perceptions of KC quality. We discuss the potential duality of responses to a work environment that supports KM, and ways to synchronize opposing effects. We also develop and validate a scale for measuring KC.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the study of knowledge management (KM) as a source of competitive advantage has emerged as a prevailing theme in management research (e.g., Argote, 2005; Chauvel & Despres, 2002; Johannessen & Olsen, 2003). Efforts to provide insight into KM and means of influencing it have revealed that "real knowledge management is not possible without true community" (Hassell, 2007, p. 193). In other words, KM can only take place in organizations that foster a *KM culture*, defined as shared values that promote and encourage behaviors such as knowledge sharing (as opposed to hoarding) and proactively seeking and offering knowledge. Organizations' acknowledgment of the importance of KM culture, as well as the substantial attention devoted to such culture in KM research, are relatively new phenomena. This is because organizations have only recently begun to expect their employees to consistently share and exchange knowledge; in the past, orga-

nizations typically urged workers to pursue individual goals and rewarded them on the basis of individual performance and know-how (e.g., DeTienne, Dyer, Hoopes, & Harris, 2004; Hassell, 2007; Leidner, Alavi, & Kayworth, 2006).

Most research to date focuses on KM culture as one of several *KM enablers*, defined as organizational mechanisms for fostering consistent access to knowledge (Chauvel & Despres, 2002). This body of research examines the effect of KM culture on KM behavior (e.g., knowledge sharing), as well as subsequent effects on KM-related outcomes (e.g., team performance). For example, Lee and Choi (2003) investigated four KM enablers, including KM culture, structure, people, and IT, and concluded that KM culture is the most important factor in promoting KM behavior. Other scholars (e.g., Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Alavi, Kayworth, & Leidner, 2005; Chen & Huang, 2007; Du Plessis, 2006; Jacks, Wallace, & Nemati, 2012; Martins & Meyer, 2012) have similarly identified culture as a major catalyst, or alternatively a major barrier, to KM behavior. In particular, the latter works assume that normative influence, a state in which employees are pushed to conform to KM-related standards set by the organization, is the underlying mechanism driving the effects of KM culture (e.g., Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2007).

Despite the growing interest in KM culture, there is a dearth of empirical studies investigating the role of KM culture in one spe-

cific KM behavior, namely, knowledge continuity (KC). KC refers to the preservation of knowledge from experienced employees before they leave their positions (e.g., because they are transferring to other positions with the same employer, or because they are leaving the employer due to retirement, resignation, or termination), and the transfer of such knowledge to their successors. Thus, KC involves KM-related activities (documenting, sharing, etc.) in a specific context of job transition, i.e., staff reshuffling (Beazley, Boenisch, & Harden, 2003; Hedlund, 1994). This context should be considered bearing in mind the environment in which contemporary organizations are required to operate. It is an environment "defined by the transformation of knowledge into a capital asset, the unique nature of that asset, impending baby-boomer retirements and chronic job turnover that threaten the asset, and the relationship of knowledge continuity to productivity and innovation in the Information Age" (Beazley, Boenisch, & Harden, 2002, p. 1).

This contextual understanding highlights the urgent need for, and great potential of, KC as a managerial framework that goes beyond employee retention or maintaining knowledge bases. Rather, KC entails dynamic systems that reinforce human capacity to avoid the inevitable knowledge loss related to job turnover (Amidon, 1997). Indeed, when properly practiced, KC is likely to benefit both the employer (for example, in the form of speeding the learning curve and decreasing errors of new employees) and the incoming employee (for example, in the form of smoother job intake) (Beazley et al., 2003; Hedlund, 1994; Nonaka, 1991).

An important aspect of KC that sets it apart from other KM behaviors relates to its dependence on the willingness of the departing employee to pass knowledge on to his or her successor. More specifically, KM is often viewed as an exchange process, in which employees both provide and receive knowledge. When an employee who is firmly embedded in his or her organizational role is called upon to impart knowledge, he or she may feel obliged to share that knowledge in order to be able to receive similar services from other coworkers who possess information that the employee requires (e.g., McAdam & McCreedy, 2000; Ranft & Lord, 2000). However, KC takes place in a context in which the incentives of the departing employee to share knowledge may be considerably lower: The employee is either taking on another role or is leaving the firm, and his or her resources (e.g., time, attention) are likely to be invested in learning and adapting to the requirements of the new position (Kalkan, 2006; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Slagter, 2007).

In light of these motivation- and resource-related barriers, strong KM culture may have a particularly important role in KC, by instilling in departing employees a sense of duty to assist their successors as well as the discipline needed for investing time and effort in this task during the changeover period (e.g., Alavi et al., 2005; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001). Accordingly, the first objective of this paper is to examine the association between KM culture and KC behavior.

This paper further suggests that, among employees who transition to new jobs (as opposed to employees who retire, resign, or are terminated without having new positions lined up), KC-related behavior may be affected by sources of normative influence other than organizational KM culture: namely, by the KM behavior of the supervisor in the new position. In particular, whereas the organization may be perceived as an abstract entity, employees often view the workplace very directly through their relationship with their supervisor, as the supervisor holds a key role in the employee's entire work experience (by means of rewards, feedback, etc.; e.g., Biron, 2010; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). Employees may thus engage in KC behavior not only because of organization-wide cultural pressures, but also because they feel obliged to conform to the KM-related standards set and demonstrated by their direct supervisors and are by encouraged by their supervisors to take time out

of their current role to invest in their previous role. To the degree that supervisors are committed to and actively promote KM-related activities (for example, by being supportive of, or role-modeling KM-related behavior) they establish "a core practice of knowledge management at its most critical interface" (de Gooijer, 2000).

Interestingly, few studies have addressed the role of the supervisor in subordinates' KC behavior specifically, or in their KM behavior in general. Most empirical studies related to this topic focus on the relationship between supervisors' leadership styles (e.g., radical, innovative-collaborator, and adaptor styles, Jain & Jeppesen, 2013; or empowering styles, Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006) and KM practices in the organization (for a review see Krogh, Nonaka, & Rechsteiner, 2012). Only one study, by Donate and de Pablo (2015), provides insights regarding leaders' own KM behavior as an antecedent of KM behavior of others in the organization. We seek to add to this recent study. Specifically, whereas Donate and de Pablo (2015) consider the effect of KM behavior of senior managers and executives on KM behavior at the firm level, our study seeks, as its second objective, to examine the effect of KM behavior of current direct supervisors on KC behavior at the individual level, above and beyond the effect of organization-wide KM culture.

Our study also offers two methodological contributions. First, in terms of research design, whereas prior research considers KC from the perspective of the departing employee, with little attention given to the employee stepping in (the successor), we consider the perspectives of both the departing employee and the successor. We use self-reported data on organizational KM culture, supervisor KM behavior, and employees' KC behavior, collected from both parties involved in the job transition. These data enable us to examine the relative salience of the two sources of normative influence (KM culture and supervisor KM behavior) for the departing employee and the successor. Such a design is also useful for alleviating concerns associated with data drawn from a single source. Second, in terms of operationalization, as we were unable to locate a scale explicitly designed to measure KC, we follow the conventions for scale development in the social sciences (Schutte et al., 1998) to construct and validate a KC scale.

1.1. Knowledge continuity

The workforce in the Information Age is characterized by frequent transfers, resignations, and terminations. These trends (e.g., restructuring and downsizing of firms, job hopping of Generation Y employees), alongside the impending retirement of baby boomers over the next decade or so, expose contemporary organizations to a chronic threat of knowledge loss (Beazley et al., 2002; Menicucci, 2006). The departure of knowledge workers imposes various challenges on firms, including hiring and training new employees, team destabilization, high workload on the remaining employees, loss of business contacts, etc. One of the tools to eliminate or reduce the impact of these challenges is the application of KC, an offshoot of the field of KM. Whereas KM concerns capturing and sharing valuable knowledge among current employees (Hedlund, 1994), KC focuses on the transfer of critical knowledge (the knowledge that facilitates high performance in a given position) from current employees who leave their positions to those who replace them. KC reduces the stress and workload associated with the transition process and speeds the integration of incoming employees, and thus increases productivity (Beazley et al., 2002; Eucker, 2007; Field, 2003).

1.2. Knowledge management culture and knowledge continuity

Many scholars agree that KM behavior is likely to be affected by both individual and organizational factors (e.g., Lin, 2007; Martins & Meyer, 2012; Ndlela & Du Toit, 2001; Zboralski, 2009). With respect to the latter, it has been argued that once an employee joins an