



Intrinsically motivating employees' online knowledge sharing: Understanding the effects of job design



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ABSTRACT

The knowledge management literature emphasizes intrinsic motivation in promoting employees' knowledge sharing due to its consistently positive and lasting effect. Yet, how intrinsic motivation to share knowledge can be nurtured remains elusive and it is often left to random development. This study examines how job design, which determines the conditions in which employees develop and function, influences their intrinsic motivation to share knowledge. A model that specifies the effect of different job design characteristics and clarifies the underlying mechanism through which job design affects intrinsic motivation is developed. The model is assessed with data collected in a survey of 255 employees. Implications of the findings for research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Knowledge is the basis of many business processes and activities in organizations (Grant, 1996). Knowledge sharing among employees creates opportunities for learning, application, and creation of new knowledge, which in turn reduce costs of production, improve organizational performance, and enhance innovation capability (Wang & Noe, 2010; Wang & Wang, 2012). There is therefore a strong managerial interest in promoting knowledge sharing.

Many organizations encourage *online* knowledge sharing because it facilitates the efficient flow and wide distribution of knowledge among employees, thereby amplifying the benefits of knowledge sharing. However, promoting online knowledge sharing is also more challenging. The oft-cited reasons for not sharing knowledge, such as costs of codifying knowledge (i.e., time and effort), perceived lack of personal benefit, lack of trust, and fear of losing knowledge power (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005; Wang & Noe, 2010), are exacerbated in online knowledge sharing. With regard to costs, online knowledge sharing typically requires employees to codify their knowledge in the form of composed texts. With regard to perceived benefit and trust, it is difficult to control how knowledge shared online is applied as it resembles a public good that could be exploited by any other employee regardless of whether the employee contributed to its provision (Cabrera &

Cabrera, 2002); The lack of reciprocation by beneficiaries is more difficult to detect online; the knowledge shared may be accessible to people whom the knowledge source do not trust. Employees may also perceive a greater loss of knowledge power as knowledge shared online is stored electronically and remains accessible long after it is posted.

Among various antecedents of online knowledge sharing, motivation has been studied extensively (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Bock & Kim, 2002; Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Gagné, 2009; Hau, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2013; Hsu, 2006; Lin, 2007; Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Extrinsic motivation focuses on the goal-driven outcomes of sharing knowledge (e.g., rewards, career advancement), while intrinsic motivation emphasizes inherent enjoyment (Lin, 2007). Although both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations have been found to be significant, it is widely agreed that intrinsic motivation has a stronger, more stable, and more sustainable effect. In contrast, extrinsic motivation has shown positive (e.g., Kankanhalli et al., 2005), insignificant (e.g., Lin, 2007; Seba, Rowley, & Lambert, 2012), and even negative effects (e.g., Bock et al., 2005). The inconsistent findings indicate that extrinsic motivation may secure only temporary compliance, has an indirect effect, or needs to fit with employees' expectation (Bock et al., 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Wei, Liu, & Calabrese, 2010). Mandating knowledge sharing through the promise of a reward or threat of punishment often results in sacrificing in which employees only provide knowledge meeting the minimum necessary quantity and quality (Gagné, 2009). In comparison, intrinsic motivation has a well-established positive effect which has been shown to be stronger than that of extrinsic moti-

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vation (e.g., Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinholdt, 2009; Hau et al., 2013; Hung, Lai, & Chang, 2011; Lin, 2007; Natalia, Víctor, & Celina, 2009). Intrinsic motivation provides enjoyment and satisfaction in the activity of knowledge sharing itself, leading to a more enduring behavior (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). It can also overcome the multiple-task problem, in which employees who hold back their knowledge cannot always be objectively identified and sanctioned and sharing therefore cannot be fully assured contractually (Osterloh & Frey, 2000).

Although many studies conclude that employees should be intrinsically motivated to share knowledge, how intrinsic motivation can be nurtured remains elusive. This is partly because prior KM studies have focused more on the effects of intrinsic motivation than its sources. The gap may also be due to the traditional view that intrinsic motivation is a natural inclination or inherent disposition. Similarly, KM researchers have noted that intrinsic motivation may be more difficult to change compared to extrinsic motivation (e.g., Osterloh & Frey, 2000). However, more contemporary psychology research has begun to recognize that intrinsic motivation may be affected by the conditions in which individuals develop and function and its maintenance and enhancement require supportive conditions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This study examines job design as one potential condition affecting employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge.

We focus on job design in view of its relevance, motivational potential, managerial focus, and prior evidence. First, job design determines how employees carry out their work and it is constantly being experienced by employees in daily work. It leaves a deep imprint on the psychological state of employees (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) and is therefore likely to have a pervasive impact on intrinsic motivation by shaping the conditions in which employees develop and function (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Second, job design has been shown to motivate job performance (Garg & Rastogi, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). This indicates its potential in influencing employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge. Nevertheless, we note that online knowledge sharing is largely an extra-role, pro-social, organizational citizenship behavior rather than an obligatory job responsibility. The findings of job performance studies therefore cannot be assumed to be directly applicable and a more direct examination in the context of knowledge sharing is necessary. Third, job design is amenable to active management, through varying skill variety, task identity, job autonomy, task feedback, and task significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). It is therefore practically relevant to determine the extent to which it is effective in promoting the intrinsic motivation to share knowledge online. Fourth, some of the job design characteristics have been shown to influence employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge. Notably, Foss et al. (2009) found that job autonomy had a significant effect. It is worthwhile to extend this line of inquiry by examining the other job characteristics, as well as understanding *how* job design influences intrinsic motivation by explaining the underlying mechanism in the context of knowledge sharing.

Based on our review of the literature on intrinsic motivation, job design, and knowledge management, we propose that affective commitment mediates the impact of job design on employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge online. Affective commitment has been shown to drive employees to go beyond their call of duty to engage in extra-role, organizational citizenship behavior (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnysky, 2002). As discussed earlier, online knowledge sharing involves significant costs and is voluntary rather than obligatory. Further, job design research suggests that job characteristics influence affective commitment (Warr, 1987) while motivation researchers posit that affective commitment is an energizing force for intrinsically motivated behavior (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). These indicate

that affective commitment could be an important and relevant factor explaining the underlying mechanism through which job design influences employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge.

In sum, the research objectives of this study are (1) extend prior research (e.g., Foss et al., 2009) by examining the impact of all five job design characteristics simultaneously and (2) better understand *how* job design influences employees' intrinsic motivation to share knowledge online by proposing and assessing a model that accounts for the mediating effect of affective commitment. As summarized in Table 1, this study also advances research and practice by considering intrinsic motivation to share knowledge as being amenable to purposeful management rather than something that can only be left to random development.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Review of literature on intrinsic motivation to share knowledge

Employees who are intrinsically motivated to share knowledge find the activity itself interesting, enjoying, and stimulating (Foss et al., 2009) and engage in sharing for its own sake (Lin, 2007). Intrinsic motivation can be directed to the activity's flow, a self-defined goal, or obligations of personal and social identities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, through knowledge sharing, employees may derive pleasure from demonstrating altruism by helping others. They may also gain satisfaction from recognizing their ability to provide valuable knowledge that is useful to the organization (Kankanhalli et al., 2005).

Intrinsic motivation, which is experienced as self-endorsed rather than due to external pressure or regulation (Reinholdt, Pedersen, & Foss, 2011), is especially relevant in the sharing of high-quality knowledge which is a discretionary behavior that can only be encouraged and facilitated rather than forced (e.g., Bock et al., 2005). Indeed, the salience of intrinsic motivation on knowledge sharing is well established and supported by consistent and strong empirical evidence (see Table 2). Despite its significance, most studies have modeled intrinsic motivation as an exogenous factor. Much less attention has been given to factors influencing its development. An exception is a study that sought to explore the behavioral transfer from knowledge seeking to knowledge sharing (Yan & Davison, 2013). The study found that knowledge seeking can provide information about other employees' enjoyment, thereby influencing one's intrinsic motivation to share knowledge. Another study has identified job autonomy as an antecedent of intrinsic motivation (Foss et al., 2009). These studies indicate that intrinsic motivation to share knowledge could be influenced by the conditions in which employees develop and function. This study examines job design as one such condition.

2.2. Job design characteristics

The job design model suggests that job characteristics can influence various work outcomes such as work quality, job satisfaction, absence from work, and turnover (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The five core job characteristics are skill variety, task identity, job autonomy, task feedback, and task significance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). *Skill variety* refers to the degree to which the job requires a range of different activities in carrying out the work, involving the use of different skills and talents of the employee (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). *Task identity* refers to the degree to which the job requires doing a whole and identifiable piece of work from beginning to end. A job with high task identity requires the employee to follow through the main stages to "provide a complete unit of product or service" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257) instead of

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