



Full length article

Employees' knowledge searching in professional virtual forums and in teams: A complement or substitute?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2016
Received in revised form
21 January 2017
Accepted 1 May 2017
Available online 2 May 2017

Keywords:

Professional virtual forums
Employee creativity
Creative thinking
Expertise identification
Knowledge searching

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the complementary or substitute relationship between knowledge searching in teams and in professional virtual forums (PVFs) will depend on the motivations of knowledge searching. We select creative thinking as an intrinsic motivation of knowledge searching in teams and expertise identification as an extrinsic motivation of employees' knowledge searching in teams in order to do creative work. Using the sample of 201 professional employees in Chinese stock service companies, our results demonstrate that when employees are driven by creative thinking, their searching knowledge in PVFs will decrease their searching in teams, which is a substitute effect. When employees are driven by expertise identification, employees' searching knowledge in PVFs will not influence their searching in teams. These findings extend extant knowledge searching and creativity literature by taking employees' knowledge searching motivation and knowledge searching in PVFs into the consideration. Theoretical and practical suggestions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Employee creativity is an important factor for companies' innovation and a critical ability for companies to survive in the competitive business environment (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Researchers have found that knowledge, experiences, insights, and opinions from different sources can facilitate creativity and innovation (Wang, Gray, & Meister, 2014; Yan & Davison, 2013). Currently, team becomes a popular basic organizational unit for most organizations and an important knowledge source of employees (Dong, Bartol, Zhang, & Li, 2016; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). The knowledge embedded in a team will be a critical input of employees' creativity (Amabile, 1983; Chae, Seo, & Lee, 2015; Conti, Coon, & Amabile, 1996; Jaussi & Randel, 2014). Meanwhile, with the development of digital technology and widely used internet, increasingly research attentions have paid to the influence of new on-line knowledge sharing platforms and tools on employee creative idea generation (Karakaya & Demirkan, 2015;

Oldham & Da Silva, 2015; Yan & Davison, 2013), especially the professional virtual forums (PVFs). PVFs are knowledge sharing platforms where professional persons come together and share their expertise knowledge online, such as posting messages, reading materials, and attending synchronous discussions, which can act to help individuals generate creative ideas (Lai, Chen, & Chang, 2014; Lin, Hung, & Chen, 2009; Tang & Ding, 2014; Tang & Ye, 2015).

Although the importance of employee's searching knowledge in teams has been well recognized (Baer, 2010; Dong et al., 2016; Gilson & Madjar, 2011; Perry-Smith, 2014; Rodan & Galunic, 2004), and searching knowledge from PVFs is also found to be beneficial for individual creativity (Tang & Ye, 2015), none research has addressed whether the two kinds of employee's knowledge searching will complement or substitute with each other to influence creativity. As suggested by scholars (e.g. Hansen & Haas, 2001; Tang & Ye, 2015), the attention of knowledge searching for an employee is a kind of limited resource, it is possible that the two kinds of knowledge searching behaviors would influence each other. Thus, the purpose of our paper is to investigate whether knowledge searching in PVFs is complementary or substitute for knowledge searching in order to improve employee creativity. The

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findings of our paper will give managers suggestions on employee's knowledge searching and their creativity in digital age.

Drawing from the self-consistency theory which suggests that individuals who enjoy a positive self-image will engage in and find satisfying those behavioral roles that maximize their sense of cognitive balance or consistency (Swann, 2011, pp. 23–42), we argue that the complementary or substitute relationship between employees' knowledge searching in team and in PVFs would depend on their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation of knowledge searching. Specifically, the present study selects creative thinking as an intrinsic motivation of knowledge searching which means employee searching knowledge in order to satisfy personal creative thinking needs, such as learning about problems (Gray & Durcikova, 2005; He & Wei, 2009; Lai et al., 2014) and willingness to participate in creativity relevant activities (Amabile, 1983; Gagné, 2009; Ward, 2007; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). We also identify expertise identification as an extrinsic motivation of knowledge searching, which means that employees driven by expertise identification are likely to grasp the situation of other members' expertise and maintain their prestigious position of expert in the teams (Gray & Meister, 2004). Furthermore, we propose that when driven by creative thinking, employees might stop engaging in knowledge searching in teams if their intensively search knowledge in PVFs, because the knowledge obtained from PVFs has satisfied their intrinsic needs of knowledge searching. In such a case, searching knowledge in PVFs would substitute searching knowledge in teams. However, when driven by expertise identification, employees might continue searching knowledge in teams because they need to maintain their expertise recognition in teams by knowing the situation of other team members' expertise. In this way, employees' searching knowledge in PVFs would complement with searching knowledge in teams.

To examine our propositions, we analyze the data of 201 professional employees from eight stock service companies in China and the results turn out that searching knowledge in teams is important contributor to employees' creativity. Creative thinking and expertise identification both positively predict employees' knowledge searching in teams. Moreover, when driven by creative thinking, employees' engagement in knowledge searching in PVFs substitutes for their searching knowledge in teams. There is no complementary or substitute relationship between the two kinds of searching knowledge behaviors when employees are driven by expertise identification.

2. Literature review

2.1. Knowledge searching in teams and its influence on creativity

Information, domain knowledge, experiences, and new opinions are critical inputs of the creativity processes (Amabile, 1983; Conti et al., 1996; Huang & Liu, 2015). Knowledge searching refers to individuals' intentional actions taken to seek out and access others' expertise, experience, insights, and opinions from different sources (Wang et al., 2014). Work team is the source of diversified knowledge, skills, work experiences and cognitive resources (Hirst, Van Knippenberg, & Zhou, 2009; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). Team members usually serve as knowledge banks on particular topics of expertise or act as a bridge for employees to access to different and broad knowledge or information (Tang & Ye, 2015) and thus stimulate employees' creativity. In this way, knowledge searching in teams is likely to help employee improve creativity. Moreover, existing empirical studies also provided evidence that searching knowledge in teams would facilitate individual learning effectiveness (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005), cognitive replication (Lin, Kuo, Kuo, Ho, & Kuo, 2008), cognitive

adaptation and cognitive innovation (Wang et al., 2014), and employee creativity (Baer, 2010; Dong et al., 2016; Gilson & Madjar, 2011; Perry-Smith, 2014; Rodan & Galunic, 2004). Hence, we point out the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Knowledge searching in teams is positively related to employee creativity.

2.2. Motivational factor for knowledge searching in teams

Motivation refers to a "process that energizes and guides individuals in choosing a voluntary behavior among various alternatives, and sustains the chosen behavior" (Yang & Lai, 2011). Motivation can be divided into two kinds, intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivations (Amabile, 1983). Intrinsic motivation describes that individuals will derive a critical source of enjoyment and vitality from performing the tasks themselves (Amabile, 1983). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation refers to the individual's inclination towards performing tasks that will bring tangible or verbal rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies on the relationship between intrinsic motivation and knowledge searching behaviors (e.g. Yan & Davison, 2013) found that intrinsic motivation towards knowledge searching aims to satisfy individuals' needs toward exploration (Gagné, 2009; Gray & Durcikova, 2005), or fulfill their dispositions towards enjoying learning (Houle, 1961). The other studies focused on the relationship between extrinsic motivation and knowledge searching argued that individuals would access knowledge in order to keep their expertise image in the organization (Gray & Meister, 2004), win recognition (Chen & Hung, 2010; He & Wei, 2009) and satisfy job's intellectual demands (Gray & Meister, 2004).

Creative thinking and expertise identification are the representatives of employees' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of knowledge searching, respectively. Creative thinking is an individual trait (e.g. Amabile, 1988; Palanski & Vogelgesang, 2011). Creative thinking drives individuals to engage in creative tasks due to the fact that behaving creatively is enjoyable for them (Gagné, 2009) and serves as a normative characteristic of them (Ward, 2007). Individuals who are creative thinking are willing to participate in creativity relevant activities and creative processes such as problem identification, information searching, encoding, and ideas generation (Amabile, 1983; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). They tend to fully identify the problem from various perspectives, and search diverse but relevant information as much as possible (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Since work team is an important source of expertise, work experience, and insights (Hirst et al., 2009; Joshi & Roh, 2009; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Tang & Ye, 2015), it is likely that creative thinking will motivate employees search knowledge from other team members. Hence, we point out the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Employees' creative thinking is positively related to their knowledge searching in teams.

Differently, expertise identification is a kind of extrinsic motivation, which stems from not just being a member of a particular profession or owning previous experience in a certain work field, but also being respected by other team members (Tang, Shang, Naumann, & Zedtwitz, 2014). According to self-verification theory (Swann, 2011, pp. 23–42), individuals who enjoy a positive self-image will tend to adopt attitudes and behaviors that reinforce the positive image and maximize their sense of cognitive consistency. In this regard, when being an expert is a part of employees' self-concept, this positive self-concept would encourage employees to search knowledge (Tang et al., 2014) in teams because searching

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