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Why do employees resist knowledge management systems? An empirical study from the status quo bias and inertia perspectives



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ABSTRACT

Resistance to KMS (Knowledge Management Systems) is one of the major reasons frequently cited for the failure of knowledge management initiatives. Although prior studies have employed various theoretical perspectives to explain user resistance behavior, the research on the resistance to KMS has been lacking. Furthermore, extant studies on the resistance to information systems in an organization focus mainly on the mandatory use context. Considering that the adoption of or resistance to KMS is basically an individual decision and should be based on the employee's previous personal knowledge management practice, this research employs the status quo bias perspective to investigate the KMS resistance phenomenon. A survey was conducted in a large petrochemical enterprise in China at the initiative stage of a knowledge management project. The results indicate that loss aversion, transition costs and social norms have positive effects on KMS resistance intention. Meanwhile, inertia positively moderates the impact of status quo bias (i.e., loss aversion, transition costs and social norms) on KMS resistance intention.

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1. Introduction

Knowledge management practices and technologies are now widely implemented by organizations to increase their effectiveness, efficiency, and competitiveness (Schultze & Leidner, 2002). KMS (Knowledge Management Systems) are information systems that are perceived as facilitating organizational learning by capturing important (content and process) 'knowledge' and making it available to employees as necessary (Damodaran & Olphert, 2000). Because the early stage of knowledge management usually focuses on capturing explicit knowledge and sharing it through technology (Pfaff & Hasan, 2006), many organizations have responded to the challenge of knowledge management by focusing significant effort and investment on KMS. Therefore, the adoption and use of knowledge management systems is an important issue for organizational knowledge management initiatives.

However, implementing knowledge management initiatives in an organization is not an easy task (Akhavan, Jafari, & Fathian, 2005; Damodaran & Olphert, 2000). Some researchers estimate that the failure rate of knowledge management projects ranges

from 50% to 70% (Akhavan et al., 2005). Among many reasons, resistance to knowledge management systems is frequently cited by previous studies (Hahn & Subramani, 2000; Pfaff & Hasan, 2006). Due to employees actively or passively refusing to use a knowledge management system, many knowledge management initiatives fail at the very beginning. Therefore, understanding the mechanism and the antecedents of KMS resistance constitutes an important and interesting research question.

Prior studies have employed various theoretical perspectives to explain user resistance behavior. For example, cognitive dissonance (Burnes & James, 1995; Gawronski, 2012; Jermias, 2001), psychological contracts (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Henderson, 2012; Van den Heuvel & Schalk, 2009), dispositional resistance (Laumer & Eckhardt, 2010; Nov & Ye, 2009; Oreg & Sverdluk, 2011; Oreg, 2003, 2006), and the depth of intervention (Huse, 1980; Lewin, 1947; Schmuck & Miles, 1971) have been applied to explain users' resistance to organizational change. Other researchers have investigated user resistance to information systems from human computer interaction theory (Shneiderman, 1997), personal traits (Gardner, Dukes, & Discenza, 1994; Jiang, Muhanna, & Klein, 2000; Markus, 1983; Sacks, Bellissimo, & Mergendoller, 1993), interaction theory (Markus, 1983), equity theory (Joshi, 1991), attributional theory (Bhattacharjee & Hikmet, 2007; Cenfetelli, 2004; Martinko, Zmud, & Henry, 1996), etc. However, few studies investigate the information system resistance behavior from the status quo bias

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theory. Furthermore, we are not aware of any studies on the resistance to KMS.

Prior research on the resistance to information systems in an organization focus mainly on the mandatory use context (e.g., the use of enterprise resource planning systems is mandatory for employees; otherwise, they cannot carry out their jobs) (Fichman, Kohli, & Krishnan, 2011; Xue, Liang, & Wu, 2011). Compared with those information systems, the use of knowledge management systems is mainly an individual decision. Meanwhile, the employee's attitude toward the newly introduced KMS is not based on nothing. Each employee has his/her own knowledge management strategy or tools. Therefore, previous knowledge management practices and experiences will influence the user's perception of the KMS. The status quo bias perspective explains why individuals disproportionately make decisions to continue an incumbent course of action, rather than switching to a new (potentially superior) course of action (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). Thus, it provides a set of useful theoretical explanations for understanding the impact of incumbent work habits as an inhibitor of new tasks (adoption of KMS). Therefore, the status quo bias is a suitable theoretical perspective to understand the resistance to KMS. To capture the individual perceptual nature of resistance to KMS, we propose to view KMS resistance behavior from the status quo bias perspective. Therefore, the first research question of this study can be interpreted as.

RQ1: Can perceived status quo bias affect KMS resistance intention?

Inertia refers to the tendency for beliefs or sets of beliefs to endure once formed. In particular, inertia describes the human inclination to rely on familiar assumptions and exhibit a reluctance and/or inability to revise those assumptions, even when the evidence supporting them no longer exists or when other evidence would question their accuracy. Therefore, inertia is another individual-level personal trait that should have a strong connection with status quo bias. However, the relationship between status quo bias and inertia has not been tested before. Thus, we propose that the relationship between status quo bias and KMS resistance intention is contingent upon inertia. Therefore, the second research question of this study can be interpreted as.

RQ2: Does inertia moderate the relationship between perceived status quo bias and KMS resistance intention?

To answer these research questions, this study proposes a research model based on the status quo bias theory. The three elements of status quo bias (loss aversion, transition costs and social norms) are hypothesized to be positively related to KMS resistance intention. In addition, inertia is hypothesized to positively moderate the impact of status quo bias elements on KMS resistance intention. A field survey was conducted to test the proposed research model.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the related work conducted on resistance to organizational change and resistance to information systems. Section 3 presents the research model and hypotheses. Section 4 introduces the research methodology, and the data analysis and results are then presented in section 5. In Section 6, the major findings, contributions, implications of this research and research limitations are addressed accordingly. Finally, the paper concludes in the last section.

2. Literature review

In this section, this paper provides a comprehensive review of studies on the following two topics: 1) resistance to organizational change and 2) resistance to information systems.

2.1. Resistance to organizational change

In the management literature, the concept of resistance to change was created by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1947). The major idea of Lewin was that the status quo represents an equilibrium between barriers to change and the forces favoring change. Another early published paper on organizational change resistance is by Coch and French (1948). They claim that resistance to change is a combination of an individual reaction to frustration with strong group-induced forces (Coch & French, 1948, p. 521). Through a variety of experiments, they come to the conclusion that groups who were allowed to participate in the design and development of the changes have much lower resistance than those who do not.

After the seminal work of Lewin (1947) and Coch and French (1948), many other researchers also investigate the resistance to change in the organizational context. We summarize the studies into two categories: individual level and organization level.

(1) Individual level

The individual-level studies on resistance to organizational change mainly focus on three theoretical lenses: cognitive dissonance theory, psychological contract theory and dispositional resistance theory.

Cognitive dissonance states that people try to be consistent in both their attitudes and behavior (Jones, 1990). An individual who experiences inconsistency (dissonance) tends to become psychologically uncomfortable and is motivated to try to reduce this dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In order to reduce the severe stress of dissonance, individuals will seek to re-establish a balance between attitudes and behavior. Therefore, the presence of such dissonance will motivate the person to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance by changing either their attitudes or behavior to bring them into line (Robbins, 1989). The theory of cognitive dissonance has been used by many studies to understand why and how users resist organizational change (Burnes & James, 1995; Gawronski, 2012; Jermias, 2001). For example, Gawronski (2012) examines how an organization's culture and the degree of cognitive dissonance generated by proposals for change influence the depth and type of employee involvement required to create a positive climate for change. Building on the theory of cognitive dissonance, Jermias (2001) predicts that commitment to a particular course of action will cause people to become insensitive to the potential benefits of the rejected alternative.

A psychological contract is made up of the mutual beliefs, perceptions, and informal obligations between an employer and an employee (D. M. Rousseau, 1989). The notion of a psychological contract implies that there is an unwritten set of expectations operating at all times between every member of an organization and the various managers and others in that organization. On one side are the expectations of employees, including factors such as pay, hours, promotion prospects, training, and so on. On the other are employer expectations, including work effort, commitment, loyalty, responsibility, and so on (D. Rousseau, 1995; D. M. Rousseau, 1989). If the organization, either wittingly or unwittingly, changes or violates one part of the psychological contract without renegotiating the contract, in effect, it puts individuals in a situation where the organization makes conflicting demands on them. Therefore, when employees perceive either the process or the outcome of change to be unfair, they may resist it (Komodromos, 2013; Novelli, Kirkman, & Shapiro, 1995; Wooten & White, 1999). Many studies employ the psychological contract theory as the theoretical basis to explain employees' acceptance of or resistance to change (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999; Henderson, 2012; Van den Heuvel & Schalk, 2009). For example, Folger and Skarlicki (1999)

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