Differential influences of perceived organizational factors on younger employees' participation in offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer

Changyu Wang[a,b], Meiyun Zuo[b,*], Xiaomi An[c]

[a] School of Business, Jiangnan University, China
[b] Research Institute of Smart Senior Care, School of Information, Renmin University of China, China
[c] School of Information Resources Management, Renmin University of China, China

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Intergenerational supportive climate, top management support, organizational institution are seen as three types of important organizational factors for intergenerational knowledge transfer (IGKT), however, current studies are qualitative with little empirical evidence, further, the interrelations of them are little known. This paper investigates and verifies their relationships by an empirical study, especially focuses on their differential effects on younger employees' participation in IGKT using offline versus online communication methods drawing upon social influence theory. A survey with younger doctors was conducted in the medical industry to test the research model proposed in this study. Results show that younger employees' perceived intergenerational supportive climate (PISC) has a significant positive influence on offline IGKT, but not on online IGKT; perceived top management support (PTMS) has a significant positive influence on offline IGKT, but has a negative impact on online IGKT; perceived organizational institution support (POIS) has a significant positive influence on online IGKT, but not on offline IGKT. These findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding about IGKT, as well as help managers be more effective to enhance younger employees' participation in IGKT through offline/online methods, which contribute to offline and online intergenerational knowledge transfer to knowledge management.

1. Introduction

With the global population aging, the number of retiring employees is increasing in some organizations. Industries, as diverse as electric utilities, oil and gas producers, healthcare and the public sectors, in a relatively stable environment where knowledge can be accumulated as time goes on, are clearly feeling the influences of employee retirements and the difficulty in sourcing new talent (Stevens, 2010). Lack of appreciation of the value of tacit knowledge and lack of planning to capture retirees' knowledge before they leave may put an organization at the risk of knowledge loss that may cause failure (Bridgers & Johnson, 2006). According to International Data Corp., Fortune 500 companies relinquish over $31.5 billion a year due to failing to transfer knowledge (Babcock, 2004; Sabri, Haron, Jamil, & Ibrahim, 2014). Knowledge transfer from older to younger employees called **intergenerational knowledge transfer (IGKT)** (Noethen, 2011; Sabri et al., 2014) is an important method to maintain organizational knowledge continuity (Beazley, Boenisch, & Harden,

2003) and a matter of survival to overcome the corporate amnesia treat (Harvey, 2012). It is benefit for younger employees to enhance social skills, personal development and job performance (Bratianu & Leon, 2015), for older employees to build organization-based self-esteem (Dunham & Burt, 2011), and for organizations to increase performance (Brataanu & Dan, 2013; Peet, 2012).

Many researchers argued that organizations must carefully manage their knowledge and transfer valuable knowledge from older to younger generations to preserve the organizations' knowledge asset (DeLong, 2004; McNichols, 2008; Sabri et al., 2014). However, the success of IGKT cannot be taken for granted (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). Previous studies have found that, younger employees' willingness of learning is critical for the success of IGKT (Brataanu & Dan, 2013; Wang, Zuo, & Bo, 2014; Weiss, 2016), if they interact with older colleagues and initiate IGKT to acquire knowledge proactively, the success of IGKT would be realized easily. But in the era of "Prefigurative Culture", younger people are better than their predecessors in many ways due to their ability to accept new ideas and new technologies, the

older generation should learn from the younger generation (Mead, 1970). While updated knowledge of the younger generation has been highly valued, and accumulated experience and knowledge of older generation may be ignored, younger people will not learn the older people's knowledge as proactively as in the past. Thus, *how to promote younger employees to participate in IGKT proactively becomes an important issue in current organizations.* By the way, offline and online communication methods are both important for IGKT. Offline communication methods, which refer to non-ICT (non-information communicaiton technology) methods, such as face-to-face meetings, are more effective to transfer tacit knowledge (Nguyen & Burgess, 2014) and preferred more by older colleagues (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003), but more costly (Zhang & Venkatesh, 2014). While no enough dedicated time (Weiss, 2016), workload/busy/distractions (Cummings-White & Diala, 2013) have been identified as barriers for IGKT, online communication methods (ICT methods, such as e-mail, instant messenger or mobile text messaging, audio or video conference, online community) which have the capability to overcome the temporal and spatial barriers that prevent employees from holding a meeting (Zhang & Venkatesh, 2014), should be used to transfer implicit knowledge, which is also needed to be retained from older employees (DeLong, 2004). *It is therefore crucial to understand what factors lead to younger employees' participation in IGKT using both offline and online methods. The objective of our study is to address this issue.*

It has been noted that most prior knowledge transfer studies focused on general knowledge transfer which only taking age as a control variable, while the intergenerational knowledge transfer has been largely ignored (Beazley, Boenisch, & Harden, 2003; Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Noethen, 2011; Wang et al., 2014). And an understanding of the antecedents of successful knowledge transfer from older and retiring workers to younger employees, is currently still missing (Burmeister & Deller, 2016; Wang et al., 2014). Previous study proposed that, the unique features of organizations play a major role in shaping the use/non-use of ICT for knowledge transfer (Nguyen & Burgess, 2014). Thus, the organizational factors are also important for leading younger employees to participate in IGKT using offline or online methods. Although, using qualitative methods, few research works of IGKT show that intergenerational supportive climate (Brataanu & Dan, 2013; Coleman, 2013; Kuyken, Ebrahimi, & Saives, 2009; Markkula, 2013; McNichols, 2010), top management support (Brataanu & Dan, 2013; Caroline Martins & Meyer, 2012; Elkington, 2013; McNichols, 2010; Weiss, 2016), and organizational institution (DeLong, 2004; Elkington, 2013; McHenry & Ash, 2013) are main types of organizational factors for IGKT, they mainly took IGKT as an entire process neither emphasizing the influences of these factors on behaviors of younger employees, nor differentiating using offline/online communication methods. Furthermore, no study is found to empirically verify the relationships between these organizational factors and younger employees' participation in IGKT either using offline or online methods. A review of literature shows that even in the field of general knowledge transfer, no study is found to examine the differential effects of organizational factors on employees' knowledge acquiring behavior using offline versus online communication methods.

As we discuss later, for younger employees, the effectiveness, the levels of challenge and cost of participation in IGKT using offline versus online methods would be different. We suspect that the same set of organizational factors affect younger employees' participation in IGKT using offline methods, may exhibit differential effects on their participation in IGKT using online methods. We believe that a systematic investigation into the respective effects of various organizational factors is a crucial step toward a more complete understanding of knowledge transfer using offline and online methods in the field of IGKT. According to psychological climate theory (James et al., 2008), "It is individual employees' perceptions and evaluations of the work environment, rather than the actual environment, that mediates attitudinal and behavioral response." Given our emphasis on individual-level

behaviors, we focus on individual employees' perceptions of the organizational context regardless of the organization/group identity. While variation in the perceptions is likely to result from the interaction between the person and situation (James et al., 2008), we claim that younger employees' main interactions with other older and younger colleagues, top managers, and institutions may result in their perceived intergenerational supportive climate (PISC), perceived top management support (PTMS) for IGKT, and perceived organizational institution support (POIS) for IGKT, which would affect their participation in offline and online IGKT. Thus, we address the following research questions: *How do younger employees' perceived organizational factors (PISC, PTMS, and POIS) affect younger employees' participation in **offline and online IGKT** to access older ones' knowledge? To what extent do these perceived organizational factors differentially affect younger employees' participation in offline versus online IGKT?*

To answer these questions, social influence theory was drawn upon. Social influence theory indicates that, different social influence mechanisms (compliance, identification, and internalization) (Kelman, 1958), may occur in mandatory and voluntary context (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), and stimulate different kinds of motivations leading to different kinds of behavioral performances (Lou, Fang, Lim, & Peng, 2013; Ryan, 2000). Extending social influence theory in IGKT context, *we claim that PISC and PTMS are voluntary social factors, while PIOS is a mandatory social factor, which may have different influences on younger employees' participation in offline IGKT versus online IGKT.*

The contributions of this study are two folds. First, it provides a more comprehensive understandings of IGKT by explaining younger employees' knowledge acquiring behavior using both offline and online methods. Although the important issue of online communication methods has been largely overlooked in the field of IGKT, we regard online methods equally important as offline methods and explain how perceived organizational factors affect younger employees' participation in IGKT using them. Second, this study advances our understandings of nuanced differential effects of perceived organizational factors on online versus offline IGKT by extending the application of social influence theory. Although previous study proposed that different social influence mechanisms (compliance, identification, and internalization) may occur in mandatory and voluntary context (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), it is for the first time leveraged to explain and empirically verify how different social factors (mandatory and voluntary social factors) exert differential effects on knowledge acquiring behavior using these two distinct methods based on the underlying mechanism of each type of social factors.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The paper begins with a review of relevant literature. Then based on relevant theories, the relationships between organizational factors and younger employees' participation in offline and online IGKT are discussed, hypotheses are proposed and the preliminary research model is developed. Subsequently, the methodology used for conducting a survey is described; the results of data analysis and hypotheses testing are presented. A discussion of the overall results, implications of the study follows. The paper ends with conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Intergenerational knowledge transfer in organizations

2.1.1. The concept of knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer was defined as "dyadic exchanges of organizational knowledge between a source and a recipient unit" (Szulanski, 1996). "Source/recipient" refers to an individual, a team, an organizational unit, the organization itself or a cluster of organizations. The act of giving or delivering knowledge by the source and the act of receiving and using knowledge by the recipient are two complementary acts of the exchange process involves (Kumar & Ganesh, 2009). Without either, the process of transfer is incomplete. Knowledge transfer can