International Journal of Information Management 36 (2016) 1174–1183

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Information Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijinfomgt

Solving knowledge sharing disparity: The role of team identification, organizational identification, and in-group bias

Yu-Qian Zhu *

Department of Information Management, National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, No.43, Sec. 4, Keelung Rd., Da'an Dist., Taipei 106, Taiwan, ROC

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 14 January 2016
Received in revised form 28 June 2016
Accepted 3 August 2016

1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing across team boundaries in an organization is important for two reasons: first, teams can learn from each other and benefit from new knowledge developed by other units (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990), thus reduce duplication of efforts and gain valuable complementary expertise such as technological know-how and knowledge about markets (Hansen, 1999), which helps to avoid the risk of reinventing the wheel or repeating past mistakes, and ultimately improves organizational performance (Almeida & Soares, 2014). Second, knowledge transfer among organizational units provides opportunities for mutual learning and internal cooperation that stimulate the creation of new knowledge and innovation, which in the long term contributes to the firm's competitiveness (Tsai, 2001).

However, in most organizations, the sharing of knowledge is greatly hindered by functional and divisional boundaries: what one group or unit learns typically does not get shared with the other groups or units in the organization (Hansen, 1999; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001; Tsai, 2001). Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001) observed that knowledge is mostly disseminated to other individuals in the same group, while only occasionally does some of the knowledge get distributed through formal systems, i.e., the corporate knowledge management system (KMS) to the whole organization so that it can be shared with "organizationally-remote strangers they will never meet in person" (Constant, Kiesler, & Sproull, 1994). We define this as *knowledge sharing disparity*, i.e. the fact that people are far more likely to share with members in their work group than with other teams in the organization.

Although prior research has investigated knowledge sharing in organizations from various lenses (Ghobadi, 2015; Wang & Noe, 2010), such as organizational/team contexts, social capital, cultural characteristics, motivational factors, individual characteristics and knowledge ownership perceptions (e.g., Constant et al., 1994; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001), little systematic research exists that 1) validates that the knowledge sharing disparity in organizations really exists, 2) examines knowledge sharing from a within-team versus across team perspective by juxtaposing within-team sharing and sharing with organization KMS, and 3) explores the reasons for the knowledge sharing disparity. Indeed, if the sharing of knowledge is no longer hindered by functional and divisional boundaries, and if we share as much to organization KMS as we do to our team mates, everybody and every team benefits. In this research, we try to address the knowledge sharing disparity issue by first validating its existence, then investigating its causes from an identification and in-group bias perspective. We examine the interplay between team identification and organizational identification, and their joint effects on the knowledge sharing disparity and in-group bias. With this research, we hope to enhance our understanding of the knowledge sharing disparity phenomenon, explore ways to tackle it, and ultimately enable the movement of knowledge to be equally fluent within and across team boundaries.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Why we share: the motivational perspective of knowledge sharing

Constant et al. (1994) assert that knowledge and expertise belongs to a special category of information that is part of people's identity. Indeed, knowledge and information can be seen as an asset that is to be owned and controlled by individuals in order to elevate their own power and status relationships in organiza-

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: yzhu@mail.ntust.edu.tw

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2016.08.003

tions (Markus, 1983). Thus, individuals go through rational decision making process to share when expected benefits outweigh costs (time, effort, power etc) (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). As knowledge and expertise are highly valued, an individual that chooses to share knowledge risks losing his/her unique value in the organization (Bock et al., 2005). Therefore, organizations investing in knowledge management systems often face difficulties in getting employees to share their ideas (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002).

To facilitate knowledge sharing, it is important to understand why we share. If we zoom our focus on the motivational factors of knowledge sharing, noticeably in extant research there are two not-mutually-exclusive perspectives. The first perspective takes the view of knowledge sharing as an economic exchange, where individuals behave out of rational self-interest. Thus, knowledge sharing will occur when there are immediate, explicit benefits like monetary reward, profit sharing, gain sharing, employee stock options or credits towards promotion (e.g. Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006; Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Bock et al., 2005; Wang & Hou, 2015). The other perspective sees knowledge sharing as social exchange, where participants expect future, moral-obligated returns rather than immediate rewards for sharing their knowledge (Blau, 1964). Social factors such as relationship building, reputation, trust and social capital are brought forth into the picture (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Hashim & Tan, 2015; Hau, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2013; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Liang, Liu, & Wu, 2008). In social exchange, although self-interest is still at play, interdependence among participants becomes an important factor as well (Lawler & Thye, 1999), thus participants are willing to forego explicit, immediate returns typical of economic exchange to build relationships through sharing, with an expectation of future reciprocal returns.

Social exchange, however, is placed against the context of social interactions (Blau, 1964), as social distance increases, trust and reciprocity decrease (Buchan, Croson, & Dawes, 2002). For these distant strangers in other business units that an individual may have little or no chance of interacting with, social exchange may not be able to exert its influence. Kogut and Zander (1996) point out that the knowledge-based view of the firm brings into sharp focus the importance of identity as "firms provide a sense of community by which discourse, coordination and learning are structured by identity.", Research suggests that "identification can exist in the absence of interpersonal interaction and group cohesion" (Cardador & Pratt, 2006: p. 175). Thus, identification becomes another important aspect in knowledge sharing intentions.

Some earlier research has investigated identification and sharing intentions in various contexts. Kankanhalli, Tan, and Wei (2005) argued that when identification is strong, the need for organizational reward and the consideration of the cost for knowledge sharing such as effort required may not be significant factors to knowledge contributors because the concern for organizational outcomes may dominate. Ravishankar and Pan (2008) see identification as both influential and relevant to knowledge management research; Chiu et al. (2006) reported that identification was positively related to the quantity of knowledge shared in virtual communities, Hsu and Lin (2008) found that community identification contributed to blogger's intention to share via blogging. Chang and Chuang (2011) discovered that identification was positively related to both the quality and quantity of knowledge sharing in virtual communities. Table 1 below provides a comparison of these three perspectives in knowledge sharing literature.

2.2. Multiple identifications in organizations and the knowledge sharing disparity

Tajfel (1972) defined social identity as the "individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership." Social identification is the internalization of a social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Through identification, an individual perceives him or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group, as sharing a common destiny and experiencing its successes and failures (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In adopting the identity of the group, the individual experiences corresponding change in motives, expectations, affective connotations, background knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Identification encourages the individual to vicariously partake in accomplishments beyond his or her powers (Katz & Kahn, 1978), or even undertake personally harmful activities worthwhile insofar as they aid the larger self (Staw, 1984).

Social identity defines how we as individuals interact with relevant social groups. With social identity, an individual is no longer just an individual (personal identity), but also part of a group (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Turner & Onorato, 1999), where one is psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group, and personally experiences the successes and failures of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Under the influence of social identity, individuals may display motives and behaviour that conflict with their personal identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), for example, sharing knowledge to the rest of the team. Thus, social identity has the potential to overcome the innate problem of personal boundaries of knowledge and to move valuable knowledge from person to person, and from group to group. Knowledge sharing is no longer considered an exchange, as the "self" is merged into the group through identification (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). The person becomes one with the group and acts out of the interest of the group, instead of self-interest (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Therefore, instead of calculated behaviour such as "if you scratch my back, I will scratch yours" or "one good turn deserves another", sharing in the context of social identification becomes "one for all and all for one". It becomes like what you would do to your family members: you share because you are one team and one family.

Identification could encourage the individual to undertake personally harmful activities to aid their social group (Staw, 1984). Thus, although knowledge is deemed as an asset that is to be owned and controlled by individuals in order to elevate their own power and status relationships in organizations (Markus, 1983), he or she may be willing to sacrifice his/her own control of personal knowledge for the good of the whole social group, as long as he or she identifies with the social group. Therefore, the level of identification determines the level of knowledge sharing. For organizations in which people have similar levels of organization and team identification, there should be no knowledge sharing disparity, as they should be equally likely to share with the team and with organization KMS. However, if people identify more with their teams rather than with organization, then it is possible that there is a gap in the sharing within team and with organization KMS.

Through a meta analysis of 40 independent samples, Riketta and Van Dick (2005) reported that people are more likely to identify with their teams than with the organization First, people want to fit in and stand out at the same time, and this balance can best be achieved by belonging to smaller categories rather than to large inclusive groups (Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). This leads to a preference for the team instead of the organization as a target for identification (Knippenberg & Schie, 2000). Second, people are more likely to identify with social groups with which they are more familiar with and which they perceive to be more similar to the self (Knippenberg & Schie, 2000). As people spend most of their organizational life in teams, their workgroup membership should be perceptually more salient than their organizational membership (Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). Thus, it is highly likely that there is knowledge sharing disparity in organizations due to the fact that people identify more with their teams than with the organization. However, up till this day, it has only been conceptually developed,