

Accepted Manuscript

Title: Interpersonal Knowledge Exchange in China: The Impact of Guanxi and Social Media

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PII: S0378-7206(17)30487-1
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.im.2017.05.008>
Reference: INFMAN 3006

To appear in: *INFMAN*

Received date: 16-6-2016
Revised date: 16-5-2017
Accepted date: 29-5-2017

Please cite this article as: Robert M.Davison, Carol X.J.Ou, Maris G.Martinsons, Interpersonal Knowledge Exchange in China: The Impact of Guanxi and Social Media, Information and Management <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2017.05.008>

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Interpersonal Knowledge Exchange in China: The Impact of Guanxi and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The employees of professional service firms regularly engage in various knowledge-related activities, including the seeking and sharing of knowledge with other people; we refer to this process as interpersonal knowledge exchange (IKE). Two prominent drivers of IKE in China are the socio-cultural concept of guanxi and social media. We conduct an interpretive investigation into IKE, collecting qualitative data from employees in three Chinese organizations. We explore how guanxi lubricates the social media-based communication practices that are central to IKE in China. We report and generalise our findings into theoretical propositions, discuss the practical implications, and identify opportunities for future research.

Keywords: Interpersonal Knowledge Exchange, Guanxi, China, Social Media

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The employees of professional service firms regularly engage in various knowledge-related activities, including the seeking and sharing of knowledge with other people; we refer to this process as interpersonal knowledge exchange (IKE). Two prominent drivers of IKE in China are the socio-cultural concept of guanxi and social media. We conduct an interpretive investigation into IKE, collecting qualitative data from employees in three Chinese organizations. We explore how guanxi lubricates the social media-based communication practices that are central to IKE in China. We report and generalise our findings into theoretical propositions, discuss the practical implications, and identify opportunities for future research.

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1. Introduction

The appropriate management of knowledge resources by organizations is critical to their competitiveness, innovativeness and economic performance (Andreeva and Kianto, 2012; Grant, 2002; Kaše and Zupan, 2009; Mills and Smith, 2011; Yahyapour et al., 2015). Consequently, researchers have investigated how organizational initiatives, team behaviour and individual employee practices relate to the management and dissemination of knowledge within and beyond organizations. Some accounts focus on the value created in Knowledge Management (KM) Systems (KMS) (e.g. Karlinsky-Schichor and Zviran, 2016), while others consider the need for specific knowledge resources (Newell and Edelman, 2008). Argote and Ingram (2000) note that the knowledge needed to complete work is rarely held by a single person. Instead, it is distributed among people and across geographic locations (Thomas-Hunt and Gruenfeld, 1998), either inside the organization or beyond it (Teigland and Wasko, 2003).

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