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Revista de Administração

RAUSP  
Management Journal

Revista de Administração xxx (2016) xxx-xxx

<http://rausp.usp.br/>

Human resources and organizations

# Informational status in intra-organizational networks: The role of knowledge sharing and structural holes

*Status informacional em redes intraorganizacionais: o papel do compartilhamento do conhecimento e das lacunas estruturais*

*Estatus informativo en redes intraorganizacionales: el papel del intercambio de conocimiento y vacíos estructurales*

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Received 12 July 2015; accepted 16 August 2016

Scientific Editor: Maria Sylvia Macchione Saes

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to evaluate to what extent the similarity of informational status of intra-organizational actors relates to behavioral (knowledge sharing) and structural antecedents (structural holes) in a knowledge-intensive organization. The study was operationalized through the analysis of 462 dyads ( $22 * (22 - 1)$ ) that comprise social relationships in a development organization of technology for telemedicine. The results indicate that the similarity of independent variables was associated to similarity in informational status, but there is no interaction between them. It is concluded that the equal status can be achieved even when two actors have different bases for its construction, whether through knowledge sharing practices or through structural holes. This conclusion relativizes what is called Matthew effect in status research.

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**Keywords:** Informational status; Knowledge; Structural holes; Intra-organizational relations; Social network analysis

## Resumo

Neste estudo, o objetivo foi investigar se trabalhadores em uma empresa de conhecimento intensivo que compartilham conhecimento na mesma proporção e que possuem número similar de lacunas estruturais são avaliados como tendo status equivalente. O estudo foi operacionalizado por meio da análise de 462 díades ( $22 * (22 - 1)$ ) que compõem os relacionamentos sociais presentes em uma organização de desenvolvimento de tecnologia para telemedicina. Os resultados apontam que a similaridade nas variáveis independentes se associa a similaridade de *status* informacional, mas a interação entre elas não. Conclui-se que a igualdade de status pode ser alcançada mesmo quando dois atores possuem bases diferentes para sua construção, seja por meio de práticas de compartilhamento de conhecimento ou por meio de lacunas estruturais. Tal conclusão relativiza o que é denominado Efeito Mateus nas pesquisas sobre status.

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**Palavras-chave:** Status informacional; Conhecimento; Lacunas estruturais; Relações intraorganizacionais; Análise de redes sociais

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Peer Review under the responsibility of Departamento de Administração, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade da Universidade de São Paulo – FEA/USP.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rausp.2016.12.008>

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**Resumen**

El objetivo en este estudio es analizar si existe similitud de estatus informativo entre los trabajadores de una organización intensiva en conocimiento que comparten conocimiento de manera proporcional y que tienen los mismos vacíos estructurales. Se ha llevado a cabo el estudio por medio del análisis de 462 pares (22\*(22-1) que componen las relaciones sociales en una organización de desarrollo de tecnología para telemedicina. Los resultados indican que la similitud en las variables independientes se relaciona con la similitud de estatus informativo, pero no hay interacción entre ellas. Se concluye que la situación de igualdad de estatus puede lograrse incluso cuando dos actores tienen diferentes bases para su construcción, ya sea por medio de prácticas de intercambio de conocimiento o de vacíos estructurales. Dicha conclusión relativiza el denominado Efecto Mateo en estudios sobre estatus.

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*Palabras clave:* Estatus informativo; Conocimiento; Vacíos estructurales; Relaciones intraorganizacionales; Análisis de redes sociales

**Introduction**

This study defines the concept of informational status in organizations as an occupation of a hierarchical position resulting from the degree of deference (Podolny, 2005) received by a social actor from co-workers to gain knowledge and skills. Deference is a symbolic means of appreciation, conveyed from a sender to a particular recipient and which considers the recipient’s attributes (e.g., knowledge at work) (Goffman, 1956). Sorokin (1927) originated this concept, but the present study focuses on the elements beyond formal education characteristics. Examining informational status allows us to highlight the similarities and dissimilarity among organizational actors related to the practical and conceptual understanding of work activities. These features give substance to one of the main informal bases for stratification operating in parallel with bureaucratic hierarchies, especially in the knowledge-intensive organizations that are typical of the *New Economy* (Makani & Marche, 2012; Phelps, Heidl, & Wadhwa, 2012).

The argument here favors an analysis of informational status based on established relationships between the various attributes of human capital and their effects on creativity and innovation. More specifically, the gestures of devotion or deference some colleagues to another employee based on that employee’s ability to solve problems and to show divergent (creative) thinking distinguishes actors with high or low informational status. The more a person is judged as creative and as a problem solver by his or her colleagues, the greater is that person’s informational status. Therefore, the variation in informational status, i.e., the position or rank of a social actor in the intra-organizational network, is a main factor influencing the results of the work, especially in knowledge-intensive organizations (Campos-Castillo & Ewoodzie, 2014). This type of status is also important in employee hiring decisions and in how the process of socializing new members proceeds (Guechtouli, Rouchier, & Orillard, 2013). On the other hand, occupying a high rank in knowledge is important for work can hinder the retention of employees treated as experts (Casimir, Lee, & Loon, 2012; Crane, 2012; Joe, Yoong, & Patel, 2013). This position can be even more harmful when actors with high informational status try to hide their knowledge from co-workers to maintain their appreciation (Peng, 2013). Together, these arguments illustrate

the need for research on the elements related to informational status, and especially on their antecedents.

Among the traditional variables that affect the degree of any kind of status are inherited (e.g., race, gender) or achieved (e.g., formal education, employment, and income) characteristics (Piazza & Castellucci, 2014). More recent studies into status in organizations enrich the literature by accounting for context-specific behaviors and the properties of social network structures (Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). The behavioral elements are actions by those in the organization worthy of deference from peers. In this sense, the literature about knowledge in organizations, even without specifically mentioning the concept of informational status, consistently points to knowledge sharing as the main activity that helps individuals attain the role of expert or creative (e.g. Crane, 2012; Durst & Edvardsson, 2012; Fullwood, Rowley, & Delbridge, 2012; Joe et al., 2013). On the other hand, the literature on social networks focuses only on the effects of relationship networks on knowledge flow, learning, idea generation, creativity, and innovation, neglecting the importance of informational status (e.g. Bell & Zaheer, 2007; Burt, 1987, 2004, 2007; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). When researchers consider status, the concept is restricted to the idea that the greater the number of contacts with many relationships, the higher the status of those who control such contacts. This definition is often operationalized in social network analysis by extracting Bonacich’s centrality (Hanneman & Riddle, 2011).

Therefore, considering the foremost importance of actions and structural features (i.e., features and positions in social networks) in determining the deference given to organizational actors in environments with technologies based on expert knowledge (Makani & Marche, 2012), this study aims to evaluate the extent to which similar knowledge sharing and non-redundant intra-organizational ties (i.e., structural holes) explain the similar informational statuses of intra-organizational actors in a knowledge-intensive organization.

This study defines informational status as a position resulting from the sum of the number of times that peers indicate that each actor is (i) a creative and (ii) a problem solver. Knowledge sharing was assessed by the extent to which each actor in the intra-organizational network is involved in exchanges of information and experiences during social interactions with peers (Casimir et al., 2012; Swift & Virick, 2013). The

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