MOTIVATING THE RELUCTANT TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Private Social Networking Platforms (SNPs) are being used increasingly in businesses as tools for knowledge sharing. Features of these platforms that support knowledge sharing include wikis, forums, direct messaging, document sharing, and shared workspaces. Examples of major companies that have recently deployed SNPs for the purpose of knowledge sharing include Wachovia, Deloitte, and Cisco. In some cases, such as at Cisco, adoption has taken place with little managerial intervention and usage has become pervasive. The reasons why people share knowledge in such platforms can at least partially be understood by a wealth of prior research that has taken place on electronic repositories, intranets, electronic communities of practice, and virtual communities.

Although the use of private and public SNPs can take place without significant management intervention, anecdotal evidence from platform managers suggests that some groups of users within organizations are not participating. Among several groups that have been mentioned, one of key concern is sales people. Sales people frequently work on commission and can be the facilitators of much, if not all, of a company’s income. Companies recognize that if they can enhance the effectiveness of their sales people both individually and collectively, then organizational financial performance may improve. It is therefore of significant practical importance for researchers to understand why sales people do not share knowledge in this context and to discover the conditions that will increase sharing.

Recent empirical studies on knowledge sharing have looked at a long list of factors associated with knowledge sharing. Some of these are contextual factors, communication factors, economic factors, social motivation, social capital, trust, perceived identity verification, and attitudes (Kankanahalli et al. 2005, Ko et al. 2005, Bock et al. 2005, Ma and Agarwal 2007, Wasko and Faraj 2005). Although the findings of these studies have general application to all knowledge sharers, they do not recognize that certain groups of employees, like sales people, may consistently be subject to incentive schemes that make other factors more or less important. In addition, prior research does not consider the inhibitors of knowledge sharing (which may be role-specific), with the exception of Kankanahalli et al. (2005). Lastly, a critical but under-explored factor related to the use of social networking platforms is managerial control. Organizational concerns over the risks of social networking platforms have led to managerial controls being introduced when platforms are deployed. These managerial controls can interact with other well-known factors related to knowledge sharing.

This paper presents a research model of knowledge sharing in social networking platforms specific to the context of sales people who are compensated on a piece-rate basis. It discusses the unique knowledge sharing inhibitors that make sales people a group that is reluctant to share knowledge. Using theoretically driven constructs, it highlights the factors that both add to and
detract from the likelihood of making knowledge contributions, and explains how the factors interact to create outcomes different from the main effects alone. The classes of factors (several of which are comprised of multiple factors) that are related to knowledge sharing in this context are asserted to be motivations, systems of controls, identity representation, management support, system characteristics, training, and maturity of the community. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Model

An important focus of this model is showing how economic incentives, one of the motivational factors, interact with other types of motivational incentives. Whenever economic motivations are introduced, they negate the influence of other factors. Although economic motivations are seldom offered to organizational users of SNPs, sales people may need to have them offered to them (as they often are in case studies) because their time and efforts are already incentivized financially to do activities that don’t involve knowledge sharing. Another important proposition of the research model is that management controls reduce the likelihood of knowledge contributions by increasing costs and distrust. Nevertheless, the negative impact of controls can be limited or removed when combined with other common motivational and contextual factors such as economic incentives and training. The propositions in this paper are intended to guide a formal research agenda that would selectively and empirically test different aspects of the model.