Knowledge Sharing Via Repositories, Personal Networks, Versus Institutionalized Routines

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KM initiatives or strategies include a portfolio of mechanisms aimed at facilitating the acquisition, storage and sharing of knowledge within the organization (Hansen et al. 1999). Given that a portfolio of such knowledge sharing mechanisms should be used (Hansen et al. 1999), how do organizations decide which mechanism would be the most useful to include in their portfolio? What will influence an individual’s preference of one type of knowledge sharing mechanism over another? Prior studies have stressed the importance of organizational climate in affecting knowledge sharing within the organization (Alavi et al. 2005; Janz and Prasarnphanich 2003). Most studies have highlighted the importance of having an open and trusting climate (e.g., Janz and Prasarnphanich 2003), but do not examine other dimensions of organizational climate or contrast between the effects of different dimensions of organizational climate on knowledge sharing. We therefore investigate how perceptions of organizational unit climate based on relationships with co-workers and with the leader of the unit influence individuals’ judgements of the utility of different knowledge sharing mechanisms. We also examine both cooperative and competitive aspects of climate perceptions with their peers. By contrasting the effects of these distinct dimensions of organizational climate on individuals’ preferences for using different types of knowledge sharing mechanisms, this paper provides a richer and more nuanced perspective on the impact of organizational climate on knowledge sharing. For managers, this research will provide guidance as to how organizations should tailor their KM strategy to the organizational climate of different units and groups of individuals.

Mechanisms. Based on prior research, we identify three types of knowledge sharing mechanisms frequently used by organizations to integrate and share knowledge amongst employees (Boh 2007; Hansen et al. 1999): (1) institutionalized codification mechanisms through the use of repositories; (2) informal personalization mechanisms through the use of informal individual personal networks; and (3) institutionalized personalization mechanisms such as formal programs that routinize person-to-person interactions.

Climate. Prior research on knowledge sharing has highlighted the importance of a trusting and open climate with pro-social norms for knowledge sharing. This dimension of the organizational climate refers predominantly to the characteristics of relationships with co-workers, and examines only the extent to which there is cooperation in the workplace. But, in addition to cooperative relations, research has also demonstrated that employees also perceive competitive relations particularly with employees from other divisions. We also believe that it is important to examine organizational climate with reference to the leader of the unit. Since climate is socially constructed, work interactions with both co-workers as well as leaders will influence the manner in which employees perceive their work environment. Leaders play a key role in fostering a positive work climate for their subordinates. Hence, adopting a relational perspective, we examine employees’ organizational climate perceptions with respect to both their co-workers and the leaders of their organizational unit.

Hypotheses. We generate three key hypotheses about how organizational climate influences individuals’ preferences for using different types of knowledge sharing mechanisms.

1) First, perceptions of an open and warm climate are expected to increase employees’ motivation to interact with others and to share knowledge, and improve employees’ knowledge of whom to approach for knowledge sharing. This enhances individuals’ preferences for using informal
personalization mechanisms, compared to codification or institutionalized mechanisms for knowledge sharing.

2) Second, in a competitive climate, individuals tend to perceive that knowledge seeking implies incompetence and involves the risk of admitting that there is a gap in one’s expertise and knowledge. Individuals tend to be more sensitive to exposing themselves to the stigma of ignorance and the implication of failure. Hence, we expect individuals to be less willing to engage in personalization mechanisms of knowledge sharing, where they publicly acknowledge ignorance in a particular area and seek knowledge via person-to-person interactions. Instead, we expect individuals to be more inclined to seek information more covertly through databases and repositories, so that they can obtain information without directly interacting with people outside of their unit, and without publicly acknowledging their lack of knowledge in a certain topic.

3) Third, when subordinates have positive perceptions of their leader and respect their leader, they are willing to engage in desirable behavior, such as engaging in one’s assigned role, or engaging in voluntary activities that will help the group or the organization. Subordinates with positive perceptions of their leaders will therefore be more willing to participate in institutionalized mechanisms for knowledge sharing.

Methodology. To test the above hypotheses, we examined how five different subsidiaries of an organization, Alpha Inc. (a pseudonym), made use of a portfolio of mechanisms to facilitate knowledge sharing amongst employees. Alpha Inc., which focuses on emergency response, safety and rehabilitation tasks, has more than 20,000 employees. We first gained an understanding of the types of knowledge sharing mechanisms used in each subsidiary of Alpha Inc by conducting 29 interviews with a total of 45 employees in the five subsidiaries. We then developed a survey to test our hypotheses, which was administered to a total of 1135 employees from five subsidiaries of Alpha Inc. Responses was obtained from 1065 respondents, providing an overall 93.8% response rate.

Results and Contributions. The results of both the qualitative and quantitative analyses show support for the hypotheses. Prior research has argued that an organization’s climate plays a significant role in influencing knowledge sharing. Most studies, however, stop at the conclusion that the more open and less competitive an organization’s climate, the less barriers there are for knowledge sharing. Given that an organization’s climate is not something that can be easily changed, such conclusions provide little guidance to managers about what they should do given the inherent characteristics of their organizational culture. Our study contributes to the literature by highlighting how perceptions of organizational climate can influence employees’ relative preferences for different types of knowledge sharing mechanisms. The results of our study will thus provide guidance to managers about how they should design their knowledge management programs in line with the innate organizational climate attributes of their organization. As the knowledge management program of each organization is made up of a portfolio of knowledge management mechanisms, insights from this study will help managers to customize a portfolio of knowledge management mechanisms based on the climate of their organization, or even for different divisions or units within the organization that may have different climate characteristics.

References