

Chapter 17

Knowledge Sharing: At the Heart of Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing is central to knowledge management in organizations. The more tacit the knowledge, the harder it is to share. However, successful knowledge sharing means looking not just at the content of the knowledge, and the people and technology concerned in the sharing, but the context in which that sharing takes place. This chapter discusses relevant theories from knowledge management and other fields. It goes on to present a model covering the time, place and context of the knowledge sharing activity, developed using theories about decision support systems. This forms the final part of a three-stage approach intended to help managers (and others) make decisions about how to support knowledge sharing activities in organizations. Each stage takes the form of a question to be answered, as follows: 1) What are the business processes concerned? 2) What is the knowledge to be shared related to - knowledge creation, knowledge acquisition, knowledge refinement, knowledge storage, or knowledge use? 3) What does this mean for the time, place and context of the knowledge sharing?

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing is a fundamental part of almost any knowledge management (KM) initiative. Not surprisingly therefore, it has been the most researched topic in knowledge management. Ribière and Walter (2013) demonstrate this for papers published in one journal, *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, and any literature search will confirm that this is true more generally. However, knowledge sharing is by no means fully understood at the moment. It is a complex activity whose characteristics need to depend on the specifics of each particular situation in which the sharing might take place. Only then will knowledge sharing help an organization to achieve its goals or improve its performance. This chapter begins by considering what the key characteristics of knowledge sharing are. This includes the contentious terminological issue of what the relationship is between knowledge sharing and knowledge

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transfer. It goes on to explain the difference between tacit and explicit knowledge. Next comes a discussion of the barriers to knowledge sharing. To capture the complexity of knowledge sharing, far from it being the simple concept of a message passing from one party to another, the chapter then presents a detailed view of knowledge sharing as a process, based on wider theories of business processes.

The key characteristics of knowledge sharing are next identified as depending on time, place and context, as well as the content of the knowledge itself. These are brought together into a proposed model for thinking about knowledge sharing in organizations. Only in very special cases does this amount to something as simple as transmitting a message.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING (AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER)

Anyone writing about knowledge sharing has to face the problem of inconsistency of terminology. There are (at least) three different stances distinguishable in the literature, each of which is inconsistent with the other two. This confusion is well illustrated by articles such as that by Lee (2001) who refers to knowledge sharing as “activities of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group or organization to another.” The easiest of the three positions to explain is that many authors use the terms knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer interchangeably (Klein, 2008). However, by contrast, there is a widely-accepted school of thought that regards sharing as being a broader and more complex process than transfer. This school distinguishes between the two along the lines of the definition offered by King (2006): “transfer implies focus, a clear objective, and unidirectionality, while knowledge may be shared in unintended ways multiple-directionally without a specific objective” (p. 493).

Similarly, Berends (2005) observes that “knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer cannot be treated as equals. Knowledge sharing encompasses more than only the transfer of descriptions containing justified factual information” (p. 104). Unfortunately, there is another school of thought, also widely-accepted, which calls this wider activity knowledge transfer, and does not use the phrase knowledge sharing at all. For example, Szulanski (2000), one of our key sources for this chapter, was writing about what he calls knowledge transfer, but he clearly means the wider process we are calling knowledge sharing: “Knowledge transfer is seen as a process in which an organization recreates and maintains a complex, causally ambiguous set of routines in a new setting” (p.10). His latest paper on the topic still follows this view (Szulanski, Ringov, & Jensen, 2016).

Others also use knowledge transfer for the wider activity, such as Levine and Prietula (2012), who refer to the “transfer (or exchange) of knowledge” and from their discussion, and the references they cite, evidently are addressing what we call knowledge sharing. Neither Szulanski nor Levine and Prietula use the phrase knowledge sharing in their articles. The approach that we will take in this chapter regards knowledge transfer as one-way and top-down – usually controlled by the source, whereas knowledge sharing is a broader, more interactive process, including the narrower knowledge transfer as a special case. The quote from Szulanski above raises the prospect that it may be more helpful to think of knowledge sharing as a process than as the transmission of a message, but let us first consider where the latter, mechanistic view comes from.

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