Chapter 6
Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

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Category: Processes of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

Barriers to knowledge sharing continue to thwart organizational efforts to identify knowledge, manage its flow, and effectively integrate its use in organizational decision making. These critical organizational tasks transcend departmental boundaries and, taken in whole, could be considered to comprise the fundamental reason for the existence of the organization. Improving the efficiency of knowledge sharing is a highly desirable goal because it offers a promise of compounded returns as the organization works harder *and* smarter. Knowledge workers have developed a variety of mechanisms and routines to share knowledge, but these are all subject to one or more barriers to knowledge sharing.

As knowledge researchers continue to work toward a better understanding of the knowledge sharing process, the fundamental characteristics of the knowledge sharing transaction remains consistent, but the barriers may be transient. This article provides a comprehensive review of the barriers to knowledge sharing that have been identified in the literature and examines the ways that personal barriers have changed since the first edition of The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management was published. If the barriers to knowledge sharing are indeed found to be transient, then managers may be empowered to develop a set of tools that could be used to lessen the effect of multiple barriers, which could lead to much more efficient organizational routines. In this article, the process of knowledge sharing is examined by framing the knowledge sharing transaction as a form of communication in order to identify and isolate the barriers to that type of communication. Once the barriers are isolated, they can be overcome.

BACKGROUND

In order to manage knowledge, researchers must first develop an understanding of the way that

knowledge flows through an organization. The flow of knowledge is reflected in the most basic construct of this article, knowledge sharing. Opposing that flow of knowledge, barriers to knowledge sharing present a challenge to every organization. However, when the managers of an organization embark on a journey to improve knowledge sharing within that organization, they are met by a host of confusing issues. If they review the literature, they find a wide variety of issues that are thought to prevent knowledge sharing, each of which is typically deemed the most critical by the researcher who is promoting it. If they hire outside consultants, they may be offered solutions to problems that they do not even have. Until the managers are able to objectively measure how the specific barriers to knowledge sharing are perceived to exist within their organization, they will be unsure of the optimum method of overcoming those barriers. The first step to objectively measuring knowledge workers' perceptions of barriers to knowledge sharing in an organizational environment is identification of the many barriers to knowledge sharing that exist within the organization.

It is proposed that barriers to knowledge sharing should actually be measured in terms of knowledge workers' *perceptions* of barriers to knowledge sharing. Though the difference is subtle, it acknowledges the fact that many decisions are made on a subconscious level, and that there is no surety that knowledge workers are cognizant of the particular barriers that they face. Further, even if the knowledge worker is aware of the barriers, there is no guarantee that they will always act rationally to promote the organizational good. In addition, knowledge workers may not be able to explain their actions to researchers, and thus their perceptions must be used as a proxy to measure the effect of a barrier to knowledge sharing.

The concept of knowledge sharing is best illustrated by Foy (1999) – "facilitating learning, through sharing, into usable ideas, products and processes". This definition implies that the focus should be on sharing knowledge within an organization for a specific purpose. Thus, this concept diverges somewhat from the field of learning (because "learning" may or may not have an organizational imperative or objective) but may still draw from that field because "learning" is an artifact from the knowledge sharing process.

UNMASKING BARRIERS TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The Knowledge Sharing Process

A common tendency in KM research has been to build on the work that was begun in the 1960s to understand knowledge. Polanyi (1962, 1967), who introduced the concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge, is widely cited. Nonaka's further research into the way that knowledge is created in organizations has also been of significant influence (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Perhaps because of these two great contributors, most of the constructs that have been researched as possible barriers to knowledge sharing are cognitive/ behavioral based. From the "factors for success" literature (Bennett & Gabriel, 1999; Broadbent, Weill, & St. Clair., 1999; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Purvis, Sambamurthy, & Zmud, 2001), an emphasis has been placed on determining the factors that enable KM systems. The "globalization" research (Chow, Deng, & Ho, 2000; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2001; Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Neijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Okunoye, 2002) emphasizes culture, including both the national and the organizational culture. McDermott and Odell (2001) found that organizational culture was more important to knowledge sharing than the approach or commitment to KM.

Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

The KM literature yields several articles that describe knowledge sharing as it occurs in sample

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