

Chapter II

The Centrality of Team Leaders in Knowledge-Sharing Activities: Their Dual Role as Knowledge Processors

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the extraction of accurate knowledge embedded in various Internet repositories, liable to frequent updates of content, and the effective sharing within organizational teams; an area that has not been extensively researched. We will address this issue by exploring the central and dual role of team leaders in their capacity as knowledge processors, functioning both as “sources” and “recipients” of net-based knowledge. The case of action teams that have to deal with unpredictable situations and thus, need to obtain and make instant use of accurate knowledge, is also considered. Further suggestions are made regarding team leaders’ active participation in particular knowledge-sharing channels, the multifaceted nature of the knowledge exchange, the essentiality of time boundaries, as well as knowledge-search and knowledge-sharing costs. Besides making concrete suggestions, and far from exhausting the various issues in the literature of knowledge sharing, this study offers a potentially new scope for the team leader’s role in the knowledge society on the Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Seeking information through Web sites has become one of the principal activities for the

majority of employees working, within various organizations, who are in great need of obtaining and using new knowledge to productively carry out their daily work-related tasks (Voorbij, 1999).

The extensive implication of the World Wide Web concerns, among other issues, the easy utilization, convenience of downloaded material, retrieval speed, and numerous tools available to users that facilitate their navigation through the Web. Accordingly, both individuals and teams, within or among organizations, have vast amounts of information at their disposal (ranging from general to very specific) accessed through the knowledge embedded in various Internet repositories, which is increasing at an unprecedented rate. The Internet provides storage devices of valuable knowledge whose effective utilization assists each individual and/or work team within an organization in successfully completing assigned tasks. However, decisions concerning the extraction and use of the appropriate knowledge embedded in various Web sites are still difficult to make, especially since this body of knowledge is enormous and comes from a multitude of sources. Moreover, knowledge obtained through the Internet is liable to frequent updates of content and thus, reusing it unquestioningly is not always recommended in similar situations in the future. Such issues may not allow the members of organizational work teams to promptly and effectively utilize net-based knowledge.

More specifically, looking into the case of action teams, which operate as “knowledge communities” within an organization and which are comprised of members with special skills who have to deal with unpredictable situations, such limitations may impair their performance outcomes. That is to say, in order for members of action teams to effectively overcome difficult situations, they increasingly need to obtain, and instantly use, accurate and specific knowledge, which they do not always possess, at a faster rate (Edmondson, 2003). If this is the case, the new, incoming knowledge derived from Internet repositories (large, accessible and valuable information storage devices) may enable action teams to complete their tasks successfully.

Furthermore, in order for such a transfer of knowledge to be effective and enable action teams to make valuable use of the new knowledge acquired from outside the team, the whole process should take place within strict time constraints, in a coordinated sequence of actions (Davenport & Glaser, 2002). It should also be noted that the quality of the incoming knowledge, together with the immediate transfer to the team members, determines the effectiveness of the sharing of knowledge accessed through various Web pages. Consequently, there is a great need for a team leader to play the dual role of knowledge processor, behaving both as a knowledge “recipient” and as a “source” in the analysis, acceptance/rejection, assimilation, sharing, and effective utilization of incoming knowledge from Internet repositories.

Taking into account the complexity of knowledge-sharing activities (Argote, McEvily, & Reegans, 2003; Darr, Argote, & Eppler, 1995; Eppler, Argote, & Devadas, 1991), it is expected that knowledge processors support and promote the sharing of knowledge within action teams, exhibiting a number of characteristics that could affect the efficiency of the exchange of net-based knowledge. Building on Szulanski's (1996) proposed characteristics of “sources” and “recipients” of knowledge in his prior work, team leaders, when playing the dual role of knowledge processors, need to recognize the value of incoming knowledge, make the necessary modifications in order for the newly obtained knowledge to be implemented successfully where necessary, or, similarly, to institutionalize the utilization of the incoming knowledge. The implication here is that the characteristics that knowledge processors have to manifest, in their roles as knowledge sources or knowledge recipients, affect the value of the transfer and the use of the incoming knowledge within the team and thus, could be barriers or enablers when a knowledge exchange occurs.

In addition, team leaders can share knowledge obtained from outside the team in two ways:

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