

The Importance of Social Networking and Interpersonal Trust for Tacit Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Sharing of tacit knowledge is not without its own challenges. It is proposed here that in order to encourage tacit knowledge sharing, interpersonal trust and social networking must be present. These propositions were tested among ICT employees in Amman, Jordan. The data collected were analyzed using Pearson correlations and multiple regression, and the findings indicated that both interpersonal trust and social networking are important for tacit knowledge sharing to occur. These findings suggested that tacit knowledge sharing could only happen when there is trust between those who are involved, and that it happens they have good social networking.

Keywords: Tacit knowledge sharing, interpersonal trust, social networking.

I INTRODUCTION

A commonly agreed fact about explicit knowledge is that it is available anywhere and everywhere in various forms such as books, websites, manuals, video clips, databases, expert systems, and other visual and oral formats. Explicit knowledge is important because it benefits the organization by improving the time efficiency of the employees (Hansen & Haas, 2001). Luckily, not much encouragement is necessary for the sharing of explicit knowledge. In fact, we daily communicate and disseminate numerous explicit knowledge to the people around us. Most of us would agree that it is easy to share explicit knowledge, or at least it is easier than sharing of tacit knowledge (Hirschheim, Heinzl & Dibbern, 2009; Ipe, 2003). Therefore, although none should ignore the necessity of explicit knowledge sharing, it can be easily done, hence there is a need to focus on the sharing of tacit knowledge.

As opposed to explicit knowledge, sharing of tacit knowledge is more difficult (Hendriks, 1999) because the basis of the tacit knowledge is human experience (Koskinen et al., 2003). Tacit knowledge presents itself in the form of human actions, such as evaluations, attitudes, points of view, motivation, etc. Direct expression of tacit knowledge using

words is fairly difficult. The only way of expressing this type of knowledge is often through metaphors. Therefore, often the use of different methods of expression other than formal language is useful for tacit knowledge sharing.

Furthermore, the tacit-ness of tacit knowledge can be a natural impediment for knowledge sharing to occur among coworkers (Ipe, 2003). In today's work environment face-to-face discussion is being replaced with e-mail, voicemail, and instant messaging, that some of the dialogue and personal touch that are required for tacit knowledge sharing is starting to disappear. Statistics from a developed country (i.e. the US) showed that only 1 out of 5 people indicated that they prefer face-to-face discussion at the workplace (ReportLinker, 2017). As a result of this, the sharing of tacit knowledge becomes more difficult, and as such it made tacit knowledge sharing an even more appealing area of research.

Nonetheless, it has been established that tacit knowledge sharing is difficult but it is important in organizations. There are several organizational and individual variables that have been highlighted as probable factors that could encourage tacit knowledge sharing to occur in organizations. Some of organizational factors that have been found to influence employees' tacit knowledge sharing are organizational culture (Suppiah & Sandhu, 2011), and organizational justice (Lin, 2007). On the other hand, some of the individual factors that have been identified include trust (Holste & Fields, 2010; Lin, 2007), organizational commitment (Lin, 2007), and social interactions (Ryan & O'Connor, 2013). Besides that, the social media technology has also been said to be useful in tacit knowledge sharing (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2016).

However, there are other variables that have been argued to affect tacit knowledge sharing but have not empirically been tested. One of them is social network. Actually, empirical evidences have shown that social network is significantly affecting knowledge sharing in general (eg; Chow & Chan, 2008; Hansen, 2002), but a study by Hansen (2002) indicated that depending on the type of knowledge social/knowledge network could be beneficial or detrimental to knowledge sharing. However, with

regard to tacit knowledge sharing, there is not enough evidence showing that social network is affecting it.

This is also true with regards to interpersonal trust. There are studies that shows interpersonal trust is important for knowledge sharing (eg; Mooradian, Renzl, & Kurt, 2006; Wu, Lin, Hsu, & Yeh, 2009), but the study that relates interpersonal trust to knowledge sharing is still scarce. Hence, the purpose of the current study is to emphasize the importance of social networking and interpersonal trust in the ensuring the occurrence of tacit knowledge sharing.

II LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Tacit Knowledge Sharing

Tacit knowledge is crucial for organizational competitiveness and this fact has been highlighted by many scholars (eg.; Chen & Mohamed, 2010; Hansen & Haas, 2001; Selamat & Choudrie, 2004). This is because it improves quality of the employees work outcomes and it signals competence to clients (Hansen & Haas; 2001). Furthermore, the presence of explicit knowledge is meaningless without tacit knowledge to augment it (Selamat & Choudrie, 2004). This is because only with tacit knowledge that we can put the explicit knowledge into practice

Recent studies on tacit knowledge sharing is highly focused on the use of technology to facilitate its occurrence (Al-Qdah & Salim, 2013; Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2016). However, empirical evidence that supports the importance of social networking and interpersonal trust in enhancing tacit knowledge sharing is hardly available. This is probably because technology plays a significant role in our daily activities that its effects on various aspects of life and work-life attract many researchers.

Nonetheless, it is argued here that tacit knowledge sharing is a product of socialization and dialectic debate among employees (Fernie, et al., 2003) and due to the nature of tacit knowledge, it requires face-to-face interactions (Fernie, et al., 2003; Koskinen, et al., 2003). Hence, this study examines the effect of social networking and interpersonal trust on tacit knowledge sharing.

B. Social Networking

A social network is a social structure that is made up of a set of social actors (i.e. individuals or organizations). It consists of a set of actors among whom there is a system of relationships (Ortiz, Hoyos, & Lopez, 2004). Social networking, on the other hand, is defined as the degree of contact and accessibility of one person with other people (Nahapiet, & Ghoshal. 1998; Wong, Wong, Hui, &

Law, 2001). Social networking enables individuals to get in contact with other people, especially within the same social network, which is essential for knowledge sharing to occur. Cross and Cummings, (2004), and Reagans and McEvily (2003) highlighted that based on the relationships among individuals, social networking and integration could encourage and can facilitate the growth of knowledge sharing.

In the sharing of tacit knowledge, social networks enables individuals to identify people who are experts with regard to a certain body of knowledge. Social networks puts experts and non-experts within the same circle whereby interactions between them can occur. This interaction is important for discussion to occur, and during this discussions that knowledge sharing happens (Selamat & Choudrie, 2004). This interactions also develops strong relationships between experts and non-experts, which is a requirement for tacit knowledge sharing (Ryan & O'Connor, 2013).

Previously, studies have indicated that there is a positive relationship between social networking and knowledge sharing (Chow & Chan, 2008). Furthermore, the strength and cohesion of social relations is also said to be very important for knowledge sharing (Reagans & McEvily 2003). Furthermore, perceived usefulness of the shared knowledge is also enhanced when there are direct ties and personal relationships among individuals within social networks (Chiu et al., 2006; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Based on these findings it also proposed that social networking is also important for tacit knowledge sharing, and thus the following hypothesis is made.

H1: Social networking has a significant positive effect on tacit knowledge sharing

C. Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust means the willingness to rely on the word, action, and decisions of other party” (McAllister, 1995). Interpersonal trust also means that one is willing to accept vulnerability or risk based on expectations regarding another person’s behavior (Borum, 2010). In light of these definitions, interpersonal trust is crucial for tacit knowledge sharing. When sharing tacit knowledge, people are actually making themselves vulnerable to others because they are sharing their unique way of doing things. The information shared may not be a popular knowledge any may sometimes lead to embarrassment. However, if interpersonal trust exist between two individuals, tacit knowledge sharing can occur more readily.

In general, studies have highlighted the importance of interpersonal trust in facilitating knowledge

sharing. For example a study conducted by Ranucci and Souder (2015) concluded that trustworthiness can facilitate knowledge transfer during a merger and acquisition, that it leads people to become friends and comfortable to discuss and share tacit knowledge. Furthermore, many researchers (Al-Alawi et al., 2007; Butler, 1999; Lee et al., 2010; Lin, 2007;) have also identified trust as a preliminary requirement for knowledge sharing.

In relation to interpersonal trust, Ringberg and Reihlen (2008), Staples and Webster (2008) assert that interpersonal trust develops on the basis of recurrent social interactions between individuals, and its role in knowledge sharing has often been studied using the theoretical lens of social exchange theory or social cognition. Studies conducted by Wu, Lin, Hsu, and Yeh (2009) and Mooradian, Renzl, and Kurt, (2006) confirms this notion whereby their findings indicated that interpersonal trust have a significant impact on knowledge sharing. Thus, one can deduce that there is a positive relationship between both interpersonal trust and tacit knowledge sharing.

H2: Interpersonal trust has a significant positive effect on tacit knowledge sharing

III METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted among technical staffs at ICT organization in Amman, Jordan. They are chosen for this research because, in the world of IT, those who are involved in the development of ICT need to share various knowledge in order to advance knowledge. There are about 170 ICT organizations located in this area (Information Technology Association, 2017) with approximately 5645 technical staffs, indicating a need for a sample size of 361 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

All of the ICT companies listed in the Information Technology Association website are contacted, but only 56 companies are willing to participate. However, these companies are not willing to disclose the number of their ICT staff. Hence, the distribution of the questionnaire was based on the number the company's representative were willing to distribute. As a result, 400 questionnaires were distributed to the selected respondents personally through each company's representative.

The questionnaires contains items measuring their tacit knowledge sharing behavior (Bock & Kim, 2002), interpersonal trust (Yilmaz & Hunt, 2001) and social networking (Kim & Lee, 2006). The data collected were analyzed using Pearson correlation to determine the inter-correlations between variables. Hypothesis were tested using multiple regression.

IV RESEARCH FINDINGS

Out of 400 questionnaires distributed, 375 were returned, yielding a return rate of 93.75%. However, only 365 were usable for further analysis. An analysis of the respondent profile showed that male participants made up of 70.7% of the total participants. Majority of the participants (54%) were married. Most of the participants (24.1%) had 6 to 10 years of working experience. Out of 365 participants, 34.2% have served their organization between 3 to 5 years and 32.9% have been in their present position between 3 to 5 years. Most of the respondents (36.2%) in this study were non-managerial personnel, and earned more than 600JD per month (33.2%). In terms of position, most of the respondents were Web designer (46.2%), Web developer (46.2%), database architect (33.3%), database designer (33.3%), project manager (30%) and quality engineer (30%).

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations of variables for the 365 participants. The internal consistency reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) of the research measures are reported in parenthesis along the diagonal of the correlation table.

In essence, the findings in Table 1 indicated that both independent variables are correlated to tacit knowledge sharing. Table 1 also indicated that interpersonal trust is correlated to social networking. However, the correlation is rather small, hence the problem of multicollinerity may not exist.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Scale Reliabilities, And Correlation Of Variables

	N	Mean	SD	1	2	
1. Interpersonal trust	365	3.79	.68	(.74)		
2. Social networking	365	3.78	.79	.27**	(.72)	
3. Tacit knowledge sharing	365	3.88	.857	.48**	.29**	(.89)

*Note:**Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the multiple regression results. As indicated, 25% of the variance in tacit knowledge sharing was significantly explained by interpersonal trust, and social networking. Most importantly, the β -value of both variables, interpersonal trust and social networking, showed that they have significant impacts on tacit knowledge sharing. Hence, both H1 and H2 were supported.

Table 2. Regression Results Of Independent Variables And Tacit Knowledge Sharing

	β	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Interpersonal trust	.431**	9.139	.000	.926	1.080
Social networking	.172**	3.652	.000	.926	1.080
F value	62.143**				
R ²	.256				
Adj. R ²	.251				
Durbin Watson	1.957				

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

V DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that both social networking and interpersonal trust are important for tacit knowledge sharing. Indeed, social networking is crucial for tacit knowledge sharing. The findings related to social networking confirms the findings of previous studies (Kim & Lee 2006; Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Yang, 2004; Wiig, 1999; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998). This finding confirms that tacit knowledge sharing occurs among people in the same social network. People usually do not share knowledge with those they do not know. However, this study shows that we are often in close contact with people in our social network to discuss about work and how to do it best. Whenever necessary, we are usually more willing to practically show how work can be done more effectively to the person that we know closely, as compare to people that are not that close to us.

Furthermore, when anybody needs expert help or opinion in the execution of work, social network provides an extensive list of people whom he and she can refer to. Being a part of the social network, people or colleagues may contact each other to discuss work and that helps in the occurrence of knowledge sharing, and more importantly tacit knowledge sharing. Hence, organizations should encourage their employees to engage in social networking because it helps them get in contact with knowledgeable individuals.

In relation to interpersonal trust, the result is also consistent with previous studies by Ribiere and Sitar (2003), Prusak and Cohen (2001), Alder (2001), Damodaran and Olphert (2000) Cabrera and Cabrera (2005), Kouzes and Posner (1995), Yang (2004), Davenport and Prusak (1998), Wasko and Faraj (2001), Robertson and O'Malley (2000). In general, when there is element of trust, people are willing to concurrently listen and absorb knowledge from colleagues. (Bakker, Engelen, Gabbay, & Leenders, 2006). Previous researches have affirmed that trust is an important factor in emphasizing knowledge

sharing and works not only with colleagues; but also with managers.

Unlike most other studies, the finding of the current study focuses on interpersonal trust, in other words trust based on words, action and behavior of others. Usually interpersonal trust develops when we have been interacting with the other person for a certain period of time and the words, action and behavior of the other person is to our liking. The current study indicated that interpersonal trust is important for tacit knowledge sharing. When one shares his or her tacit knowledge, high interpersonal trust must be present. One does not want to be betrayed by the person who received the knowledge.

Therefore, the goals of this factor it to investigate the implication of the connection of trust among employees that expedite tacit knowledge sharing within the organization. Bakker, Engelen, Gabbay, & Leenders, (2006) ascertained that trust arises when individuals believe that their co-workers have qualities of trustworthiness, and that they would return the favor by sharing their knowledge with others. Trust also means that the knowledge being share would not be used against each other. In short, interpersonal trust is highly important for tacit knowledge sharing to happen.

In light of the current findings, it can be concluded that most of the time, employees do not share their tacit knowledge with anybody. They will only share their highly coveted knowledge with the people that they interpersonally trust and within their social network only. As such, only in an environment where there are trust among employees that knowledge will be shared and eventually be part of the organizational knowledge.

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