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Motivations of employees' knowledge sharing behaviors: A self-determination perspective



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ABSTRACT

Prior studies on knowledge-sharing motivations mostly concentrate on discussing motivation in terms of level or amount, and thus, discussions regarding the quality of motivations, in terms of their levels of autonomy, are scarce. Additionally, while researchers have addressed the significant relationships among different types of motivations, there is still controversy concerning these relationships in a knowledge-sharing context. With reference to self-determination theory, this study examines a model that depicts the influence of various types of motivations on employees' knowledge sharing behaviors (KSBs). Based on the data collected from 259 employees in 34 organizations, hard reward, soft reward, and altruism for organizational benefits are significant influencing factors of KSBs, while altruism for personal satisfaction is not. Additionally, soft reward has a significant positive effect on both altruism for organizational benefits and altruism for personal satisfaction. The theoretical and practical implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

While knowledge sharing is vital to the development of competitive advantages of organizations and is integral to knowledge management (KM), managers often find it to be the most difficult KM practice to promote in various social contexts because knowledge sharing does not come naturally to most individuals (Bock, Kankanhalli, & Sharma, 2006). For example, organizations' financial-based incentives may discourage rather than encourage knowledge sharing if employees perceive that knowledge sharing will hinder their supervisors from distinguishing their personal efforts from those of their competing associates/coworkers

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(Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). Thus, organizations often find that it is difficult to facilitate effective knowledge sharing practices among employees due to human factors, institutional complexities, and the sticky nature of knowledge itself (Liu & Liu, 2008; Yang & Wu, 2008). There have been studies indicating the sticky nature of knowledge as a barrier to knowledge sharing because it causes the sharing processes among individuals to be slow, costly, and uncertain (Liu & Liu, 2008). Achieving effective knowledge sharing practices thus depends on individuals' willingness to put significant effort into the associated social processes (Chang & Chuang, 2011). Additionally, from an economic perspective, personal behaviors are primarily motivated by self-interest, and people therefore tend to do their best to maximize individual utility (Bock & Kim, 2002; Yang & Wu, 2008). This implies that if an individual possesses particular knowledge that is valuable to him- or herself, the individual would be unlikely to share it with others to maximize personal benefits, such as increased job security and continued possession of a unique and strong position in the organization (Bock & Kim, 2002; Yang & Wu, 2008). In some cases, the costs instead of the benefits of knowledge sharing play an important role in determining knowledge sharing behaviors (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005).

Prior research recognizes the importance of examining personal motivational factors that facilitate or restrain knowledge sharing behaviors, and many studies have intensively investigated these issues in various contexts (Bakker, Leenders, Gabbay, Kratzer, & van Engelen, 2006; Chang & Chuang, 2011; Cruz, Perez, & Cantero, 2009; Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinholdt, 2009). Self-determination theory (SDT) is recognized as a well-established theory of motivation and has been widely adopted to investigate how and why a particular human behavior is induced (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT proposes that human behaviors may be encouraged not only by externally induced incentives, called controlled motivation, but also by internally evoked incentives, known as autonomous motivation. SDT proposes that a specific type of motivation can be considered as having a low level of quality if it is experienced by recipients as an attempt to control their behavior. In other words, SDT indicates that autonomy-oriented motivations have relatively higher levels of quality than control-oriented motivations in terms of facilitating a particular behavior.

Previous models of knowledge-sharing motivation mostly concentrate on discussing motivation in terms of level or amount, and thus, the discussions regarding the quality of motivations are scarce (Gagne, 2009). To be specific, the autonomy-oriented motivations proposed by SDT tend to be either ignored or falsely integrated with the control-oriented motivations in knowledge sharing studies that adopt cost-benefit approaches (Kankanhalli, Lee, & Lim, 2011; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Lin & Huang, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Therefore, our first objective is to identify and simultaneously examine key autonomy-oriented and control-oriented motivations of individuals' knowledge sharing behaviors by consulting the controlled-to-autonomous continuum of motivations proposed by SDT to better understand how various types of motivations with different degrees of autonomy may affect individuals' knowledge sharing behaviors. Additionally, it remains inconclusive whether some types of motivations having different levels of quality influence individuals' knowledge sharing behavior in the workplace more than the others. Consequently, our second objective is to examine the difference in the effects of various types of motivations on individuals' knowledge sharing behaviors. Finally, prior research mostly conceptualizes various types of motivations by adopting the perspective of the distinction between intrinsic (i.e., autonomy-oriented) and extrinsic (i.e., control-oriented) motivations, and it indicates the significant effects of different types of extrinsic motivations on intrinsic motivations (e.g., Deci et al., 1999; Roca & Gagne, 2008; Sheldon, Turban, Brown, Barrick, & Judge, 2003; Yoo, Han, & Huang, 2012). However, there is still controversy concerning such effects in the area of knowledge sharing (e.g., Cockrell & Stone, 2010; Foss et al., 2009; Gagne, 2009). A lack of a holistic understanding of how various knowledge-sharing motivations that have different quality levels, in terms of their degrees of autonomy, on employees' knowledge sharing behaviors influence one another would hinder an organization's ability to plan for, evaluate, and justify their efforts to enhance employees' knowledge sharing behaviors. Thus, our third objective is to investigate the effects of the control-oriented motivations on the autonomy-oriented motivations regarding employees' knowledge sharing behaviors.

2. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

2.1. Self-determination theory

The core of SDT is that individuals may be motivated to perform certain behaviors both externally (i.e., controlled motivation) and internally (i.e., autonomous motivation) (Cockrell & Stone, 2010).

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