Aligning knowledge sharing interventions with the promotion of firm success: The need for SHRM to balance tensions and challenges

Rory Donnelly

*University of Liverpool Management School, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool L69 7ZB, UK*

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**ABSTRACT**

Knowledge sharing plays a key role in facilitating organizational goals. However, the extensive digitization of employee knowledge can potentially undermine the full realization of the premises for sustainable competitive advantage advanced by the knowledge-based view. As a corollary, it is crucial that the generation and exchange of knowledge remains continuous, but this presents tensions and challenges for management. Thus, the roles of knowledge management interventions and recognition and reward in influencing knowledge-sharing views and behaviors are examined in this paper through the investigation of four propositions. The findings reveal tensions that extend beyond firm borders and shape employee views and behaviors in relation to strategic knowledge management initiatives. In addressing the challenges presented, a framework for enhancing and sustaining knowledge-based success is developed, which contributes to the refinement of the knowledge-based view and strategic HRM aligned with it.

1. **Introduction**

   Knowledge sharing is a key contributor to the sustainability of knowledge-based organizational success and competitive advantage (Cegarra-Navarro, Soto-Acosta, & Wensley, 2016; Kianto, Sáenz, & Aramburu, 2017), but it also engenders significant tensions and challenges (Mabey & Zhao, 2017). Much of the existing research into managerial efforts to enhance the diffusion of knowledge within organizations has adopted a meso-level lens, focusing on the use of software systems (see Alavi & Tiwana, 2003; Olivo, Guzmán, Colomo-Palacios, & Stantchev, 2016). In comparison, our understanding of the role of human resources in sharing knowledge is more limited (Minbaeva, 2013), even though they make use of such systems and participate in knowledge exchange at a micro level, not only with other organizational members, but also with external parties such as clients.

   Numerous scholars assume that employees will freely share their knowledge to support organizational interests (Anand & Walsh, 2016; Hekman, Steensma, Bigley, & Hereford, 2009). This can be attributed to a communal perspective on knowledge (Benkler, 2006), which is implicit in the knowledge-based view (KBV). However, emerging arguments from a microfoundational standpoint suggest that the propensity to share knowledge is moderated by competing interests and the extension of direct reward and/or recognition. These differing interpretations present complex management challenges that need to be addressed, particularly in the case of knowledge-intensive businesses, such as software and IT services firms. Thus, attendant propositions are posed through the course of this paper and investigated through the lens of employees working for these types of firms.

   With regard to the structure of this paper, the next section establishes the bases for these propositions by first setting out the strategic importance of knowledge and its management to firm interests. After which, communal and microfoundational perspectives are examined because of the tensions they foster for strategic HRM and technological interventions, followed by recognition and reward. The research design is then explained before presenting the findings and their contributions to the refinement of the KBV and strategic practice.

2. **Knowledge and the importance of its strategic management to organizations**

   The resource-based view has been instrumental in drawing attention to the differential contributions made by the physical and intangible assets available to a firm and its ongoing competitive advantage (Barney, Ketchen, & Wright, 2011). Human resources play a primary role in enabling a firm to generate and/or capitalize on these types of assets. Over recent years, interest has increasingly concentrated on organizing human contributions to knowledge-based resources that are valuable, rare, and imperfectly replicable. Indeed, a focus on assets of this nature is championed by the KBV, which constitutes an extension of the resource-based view and is of greater relevance in examining the strategic management of knowledge resources (Nonaka, Toyama, & Hirata, 2015; Takeuchi, 2013).
Such resources are heterogeneous with respect to their character and strategic importance. Much of the knowledge management (KM) literature adopts the established dichotomy between tacit and explicit knowledge, with implications for the codification and digitization of these forms of knowledge (see Mabey & Zhao, 2017). Both types of knowledge stem from human resources and involve their contributions. Tacit knowledge best meets the valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable criteria. However, given that the tacitness of knowledge varies in degree and may change over time (Styhre, 2004), knowledge is viewed here as a spectrum from subconscious tacit to explicit codifiable knowledge.

This range of knowledge is derived from various sources including organizational, human, and social capital (Swart & Kinnie, 2013). Organizational capital is drawn from a firm’s structures, routines, and explicit knowledge (Morabito, Sack, & Bhat, 2017). Human capital includes the talent, intellectual capabilities, and tacit knowledge of human sources (Coppin, 2017), while social capital stems from the formal and informal structure and content of relationships and networks in and outside organizations (Aalbers, Dollsma, & Koppius, 2014).

The utility of the knowledge derived from these sources is likely to differ, so we need to gain insight into this from the perspective of the users of organizational knowledge themselves because of the potential effect on their behaviors. As the knowledge used by an organization and its members is drawn from within and across its borders, there is also a need to move beyond a firm-bound perspective on knowledge sharing, which the majority of existing studies have not done. The tensions and challenges generated in this context are discussed in the following sections, which lead to the formation of four propositions that require empirical investigation.

### 2.1. Knowledge sharing and its management through strategic HRM interventions

The exchange and effective management of knowledge that is distributed and in various forms play a key role in supporting organizational learning, high performance, and a knowledge-based competitive advantage (Birasnav, 2014; Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016; Kianto et al., 2017; Michaelis, Wagner, & Schweizer, 2015; Mikael & Pateli, 2017; Morabito et al., 2017). Existing analyses in the literature on KM have primarily adopted an organization-level focus on the role played by software in facilitating the digital codification of tacit knowledge and its accessibility to organizational members (Olivo et al., 2016). Similarly, a meso-level perspective has dominated much of the HR- and technology-related literature, drawing on a communal interpretation of knowledge (Felin, Zenger, & Tomsik, 2009). This can be partly attributed to the expectation that intrinsic motivation drives knowledge exchange and that individuals will voluntarily engage in knowledge-sharing activities because of shared interests and personal values (Carvalho Almeida, Lesca, & Canton, 2016; Lin, 2007). Unitarist assumptions of collaborative and reciprocal relations are constituent in this line of reasoning, reinforced through strategically aligned HRM interventions.

Such interventions typically seek to encourage knowledge exchange by signaling desired behaviors (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Minbaeva, 2013). In doing so, they aim to steer employees’ individual engagement with knowledge sharing through influencing their perceptions, actions, and interactions (Minbaeva, Måkelä, & Rabbiosi, 2012). Insight into the effect of these meso-level practices at an individual level is therefore critical because it is human resources who primarily diffuse and process/integrate knowledge through their interpersonal interactions and engagement with firm routines and digitization (Foss, Minbaeva, Pedersen, & Reinhold, 2009).

This intersection between strategic HRM practices and individual behaviors is important to understand because of the potential implications for knowledge sharing and its management. If the organizational context in which an individual operates is collaborative and/or characterized by a high-commitment approach to HRM, knowledge is likely to be shared more freely (Anand & Walsh, 2016; Chiang, Han, & Chuang, 2011; Yu, Yen, Barnes, & Huang, 2018). In such a case, individuals may be less likely to view their knowledge as proprietary and hoard valuable elements of it from interpersonal exchange and/or disengage with codification initiatives and activities (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). Indeed, from a communal perspective, ownership is diffuse because no single person has ownership of knowledge and it cannot be meaningfully owned (Benkler, 2006). Yet this interpretation is likely to vary according to standpoints (Solinger, Hofmans, & Olffen, 2015).

A communal viewpoint is supportive of open boundary-less knowledge sharing, but conflicting interests are likely to arise. Employees providing client services operate in the context of a multiplex of relations with their employing organization, peers, management, and clients (Fidel, Schlesinger, & Cervera, 2015; Kinnie & Swart, 2012). The nature and strength of these various relations are important in mediating knowledge-sharing behaviors (Aalbers et al., 2014). However, few studies have examined staff knowledge exchange with both internal and external parties. Such exchange relations generate multiple foci for gains and commitments that can cause conflicting tensions (Meyer, 2016; Swart, Kinnie, van Rosenberg, & Yalabik, 2014). As a consequence, ‘they may feel pulled in different directions by the various parties with whom they interact and consequently respond by sharing or withholding their knowledge accordingly’ (Swart et al., 2014: 284). Hence, proposition 1.

P1. Employee engagement with knowledge-sharing initiatives is influenced by dialectics between communal and microfoundational perspectives on knowledge, which affect their views on knowledge and the exchange of it within and outside their employing firm.

Empirical analysis of this proposition is needed because it generates implications for the premises of the KBV and strategically aligned HRM. The balance between communal and microfoundational perspectives is in turn likely to be affected by employee relations with peers, managers, and clients and perceptions of any recognition and/or reward for sharing their knowledge with these parties.

### 2.2. The importance of recognition and reward (R&R) in influencing the propensity to share knowledge

In contrast to a communal perspective, a microfoundational one suggests that extrinsic R&R is needed to encourage individuals to share their knowledge (Foss et al., 2009; Minbaeva, 2013; Minbaeva et al., 2012). On the basis of such, engagement with knowledge sharing is likely to be influenced by an individual’s cost-benefit analysis, based on expectancy with regard to the recognition and/or reward offered and their satisfaction with it (Vroom, 1964).

As well as withholding their knowledge, individuals dissatisfied with the R&R they receive may for example seek an alternative employer or set up their own business to capitalize on their proprietary knowledge (Foss et al., 2009). This again underscores the need to recognize that R&R may be derived internally or externally, yet most existing studies have not incorporated this into their analysis (Foss et al., 2009).

It is unlikely that all organizational members uniformly share either a communal or microfoundational perspective. Consequently, the examination of aggregate micro-level views is needed to gain insight into employee assessments of the recognition and reward they receive from internal and external parties for sharing their knowledge. Hence, proposition 2 to proposition 4.
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