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A psychological empowerment approach to online knowledge sharing☆

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ABSTRACT

The success of a knowledge management system (KMS) depends on knowledge sharing. Previous research has claimed that motivational factors can facilitate successful knowledge sharing as a proactive behavior. However, little research has examined what motivators lead to proactive knowledge sharing. By integrating a psychological empowerment perspective with job characteristics theory, this study examines the role of KMS user empowerment, as a specific type of psychological empowerment, in motivating this proactivity to explain employee knowledge-sharing behavior (i.e., contribution and seeking). The findings explain that KMS user empowerment is significantly associated with knowledge sharing, and the work environment (job significance, job autonomy, ease of KMS use, and KMS usefulness) enhances KMS user empowerment. This study contributes to KM research by introducing the concept of KMS user empowerment and demonstrating its role in regulating the proactive knowledge sharing. It also helps managers to promote knowledge sharing among employees in the context of KMS use.

1. Introduction

Firms adopt and implement knowledge management systems (KMSs) to improve employees' ability to easily and effectively perform, and thereby improve firm performance (Wang, Sharma, & Cao, 2016). Most organizations are interested in adopting and implementing KMS in their organization; however, it does guarantee the success of implementation of KM. Over the past 15 years, however, only 20% of firms have increased their level of goal achievement with KMS (The Conference Board, 2000). After their adoption and implementation, KMS tend to be underused and hardly recognized by knowledge workers in their everyday work (Maier, 2007). Underutilization of installed systems has been identified as a major issue underlying the "productivity paradox" surrounding lackluster returns from organizational investments in information technology (IT) (Sichel, 1997).

A successful KMS requires users' knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing involves users' willingness to codify and share their knowledge in the KMS, while also seeking out and reusing the codified knowledge jointly from a virtuous cycle (Usoro, Sharratt, Tsui, & Shekhar, 2007). Previous research (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002; Cress, Kimmerle, & Hesse, 2006; Kimmerle, Cress, & Hesse, 2007) explained that an individual is reluctant to contribute his or her own knowledge while he or she enjoys others' knowledge in terms social dilemma. The virtuous cycle in knowledge sharing (i.e., knowledge seeking and knowledge contribution) implies a voluntary act by individuals who participate in the exchange of knowledge (Gagné, 2009) and also is some kind of organizational citizenship behavior (Ramasamy & Thamaraiselvan, 2011; Yu & Chu, 2007). Thus, organizations cannot force this knowledge sharing because unlike other IS in mandatory environments, it is an unenforceable informal task. Thus, knowledge is personal intellectual property and is embedded in individuals. In their willingness to share knowledge, employees must accept the loss of some personal time and effort (e.g., Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005b; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) or shoulder the burden of repaying other employees' kindnesses (Bock, Kankanhalli, & Sharma, 2006; Yan &

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Davison, 2013).

To overcome resistance to knowledge sharing, previous studies have highlighted the various factors that affect an individual's willingness to share knowledge from the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and both theories unified (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Jeon, Kim, & Koh, 2011; Safa & Solms, 2016; Tohidinia & Mosakhani, 2010). According to social exchange theory, knowledge sharing seldom occurs without strong individual motivation (Kankanhalli, Lee, & Lim, 2011; Lin & Lo, 2015; Yan, Wang, Chen, & Zhang, 2016). Motivation is one of the most important factors that influence employees' intentions to share their knowledge. The theory of planned behavior has explained knowledge-sharing behavior encouraged by volition and organizational climate (Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007; Hung, Lai, & Chou, 2015; Lai, Chen, & Chang, 2014). This research showed that the willingness to share knowledge was the result of exchange and was insufficient to explain spontaneous factors that represent a form of proactive behavior and require the user to be strongly motivated. Thus, the factors related to rewards systems are no match for autonomous motivation in generating proactivity (Gagné, 2009).

A better understanding of proactive knowledge sharing requires taking into account an active motivational orientation that can project an individual self-governing influence on proactively sharing knowledge (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Psychological empowerment theory proposes psychological empowerment as an active motivational orientation that occurs when one's motivational orientation is combined with the authority necessary to tap the full potential of a work system (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). A user's motivational state is important in the use of technology and job performance (Seibert, Wang, & Courtright, 2011). However, there is a lack of understanding of how psychological empowerment is developed and works for proactive knowledge sharing in the context of KMS. Thus, this study undertakes to examine knowledge sharing in terms of KMS user empowerment in performing tasks with the use of KMS. This is a conceptual extension of psychological empowerment in the context of KMS. KMS user empowerment as a heightened autonomous motivational state should inspire users to go beyond obligatory knowledge sharing.

To achieve the research goal, this study considers three key issues in comparison with previous research. First, the subjectively perceptual data (i.e., users' self-reported information via questionnaires) of knowledge sharing is limited in reflecting real behavior. This is because of the issue of memory decay and also the possibility of distortions. To capture users' proactive behaviors, this study investigates actual knowledge-sharing behavior via objective system-based data. Second, sustainable knowledge sharing can be made possible by employees' knowledge seeking as well as by their knowledge contributions. By considering the virtual process of knowledge sharing (Kankanhalli et al., 2011), this study incorporates two distinct types of knowledge sharing (i.e., knowledge contribution and knowledge seeking) in an integrative model to verify their relationship. The relationship between these two subtypes of knowledge-sharing behaviors has important implications for managing KMS in organizations.

Third, psychological empowerment can be influenced by the design of the work environment (Gagné, Senécal, & Koestner, 1997; Kraimer, Seibert, & Liden, 1999; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Jobs and technology are two important design elements of the work environment in the context of KMS. However, little research has delved into how both job and technological elements affect psychological empowerment. Going beyond previous research on KMS and psychological empowerment, our study examined both job and technological elements in the development of psychology empowerment in the context of KMS use. Overall, this study is an important step in advancing our understanding of knowledge sharing in a way that transcends its mere traditional aspects (i.e., rewards systems, and prosocial factors); it also highlights the important role of KMS user empowerment in proactively sharing knowledge.

2. Theoretical backgorund

2.1. Knowledge sharing: contribution and seeking

Knowledge sharing occurs when an individual disseminates his knowledge (i.e., know-what, know-how, and know-why) to other members within an organization (Van den Hooff, Schouten, & Simonovski, 2012). Knowledge-sharing behavior is defined as an exchange behavior between a contributor and a seeker and involves the provision and acquisition of knowledge (Kimmerle et al., 2007). These two behaviors in knowledge sharing consist of a feedback loop structure (Kankanhalli et al., 2005b). If either element is lacking, its absence makes the knowledge-sharing process ineffective and unsustainable (Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2010; Phang, Kankanhalli, & Sabherwal, 2009). A thorough comprehension of knowledge-sharing behavior necessitates developing an integrative model and ascertaining the relative importance of the factors of influence. However, previous research paid little attention to the relationship between knowledge contribution and knowledge seeking. An organization typically seeks first to capture an employee's knowledge that has largely been obtained from his or her work experience and then tries to encourage the reuse of this knowledge. Knowledge contribution appears to have been more important than knowledge seeking in previous research (Chang & Chung, 2011; Chen, Chuang, & Chen, 2012; Koriat & Gelbard, 2014; Lin & Lo, 2015; Pee & Chua, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Examining the relationship between two these KMS behaviors can reveal which one an organization needs to encourage the most. Thus, this study uses an integrative model to investigate which factors influence relations between these two knowledge-sharing behaviors.

Because it cannot be forced and is not mandatory, knowledge sharing relies on employees to decide voluntarily if they will share their knowledge. In light of its voluntary nature, knowledge sharing requires someone who is strongly self-motivated. As for knowledge contribution, an individual faces the problem of making the effort and taking the time required to transfer knowledge and overcome any concerns about ownership of information (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Therefore, knowledge contribution is a type of proactivity (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999) and organizational citizenship behavior (Ramasamy & Thamaraiselvan, 2011; Yu & Chu, 2007). As for knowledge seeking, employees tend to seek knowledge for their tasks voluntarily. One reason that employees do not seek and use the stored knowledge is to avoid any sense of obligation to repay for the contributors' help (Yan & Davison, 2013). When a knowledge seeker finds it laborious to seek advice, he or she feels the same burden of time and effort as the contributor did (Bock et al., 2006), and suffers from lack of trust in colleagues and in knowledge (Matschke, Moskaliuk, Bokhorst, Schümmer, & Cress, 2014). Therefore, knowledge-seeking is a type of proactivity that requires a seeker to be strongly self-motivated.

However, despite the importance of motivation in knowledge-sharing behaviors, there is a little lack of understanding how a person develops such motivation and how this motivation leads to the two types of proactive behavior found in successful knowledge sharing. Past research has primarily been concerned with the general motivation for both aspects of knowledge sharing. General motivational factors are divided into two parts, extrinsic and