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What Motivates Organisational Knowledge Transfer? Some Lessons from a UK-Based Multinational

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Abstract. The transfer of knowledge is an important task of contemporary organisations. In the knowledge-based economy, more and more organisations have increasingly recognised and encouraged the value of knowledge transfer. However, there is sometimes a tendency to horde knowledge, perhaps through fear of losing power or through uncertainty over job security. In this paper, we consider the motivators of knowledge transfer based on an empirical study carried out in part of a UK multinational, IBM Laboratories, in which the atmosphere appeared conducive to knowledge sharing, and knowledge transfer appeared voluntary and spontaneous. The paper questions why members of an organisation like IBM might be enthusiastic about the transfer of knowledge among themselves. The paper investigates the motivating factors that encourage the transfer of knowledge. A number of motivators underlying knowledge transfer are identified.

Keywords: Organisational knowledge; knowledge transfer; power; knowledge management; motivation.

1. Introduction

The value to organisations of knowledge sharing, transfer and exchange is increasingly recognised (for example, Keong and Al Hawamdeh 2002). Knowledge sharing is regarded as a crucial process in modern business (O'Dell and Grayson, 1998; Osterloh and Frey, 2000) because the value of organisational knowledge increases when it is shared (Styhre, 2002). Organisations require an

atmosphere in which employees will be encouraged to share knowledge spontaneously; organisational knowledge is frequently identified as the main source of sustainable competitive advantage (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Starbuck, 1992; Jasimuddin *et al.*, 2005), and knowledge transfer is widely recognised as crucial for an organisation's survival and strength (Argote *et al.*, 2000; Despres and Hiltrop, 1995; Neef, 1999; Beckman, 1999; Nonaka, 1994).

In a review of the knowledge management literature, Jasimuddin *et al.* (2005) identify three important areas relating to the notion of knowledge transfer: motivators of and barriers to knowledge transfer, knowledge transfer for innovation, and the knowledge transfer process. Van den Hooff and van Weenen (2004) suggest that determination of the factors that motivate the knowledge transfer within groups and organisations constitutes an important area of research. A few studies (e.g., Hall, 2001; Hinds and Pfeffer, 2003; Kalling, 2003; Keong and Al Hawamdeh 2002) identify reasons that account for the motivation for the transfer of knowledge within organisations.

Crudely, there are two actors in the knowledge transfer process: the knowledge contributor and knowledge user. It is understandable that a prospective user is motivated to seek and use others' knowledge as long as the perceived value of the knowledge outweighs the cost of search and transfer (von Krogh *et al.*, 1997). In contrast, the motivation of the knowledge contributor to provide

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knowledge is less straightforward; for instance, Hansen (1999) identifies the “fear of losing power”, and, similarly, Keong and Al Hawamdeh (2002) observe that “knowledge is power and no one is willing to give it away freely” (p. 49).

This paper questions whether this view is necessarily prevalent in large, multi-national organisations in which knowledge transfer might be critical to the organisation’s success. In the case we describe, it appears that knowledge transfer is voluntary and spontaneous. Respondents in the case report that organisational members are not worried about giving away knowledge to each other, and the pervading atmosphere is not one in which employees feel the need to protect their jobs by protecting their knowledge. The question arises: what motivates employees to be so open and cooperative in sharing their knowledge with other organisational members? This paper investigates the motivators underlying this phenomenon.

2. Methodology

This paper is based upon a single case study. In this study, data has been collected from multiple sources: interviews, field observations, and documents. This ensures a degree of *triangulation* (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 2), and in turn helps secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Interviews were the main data source. These interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded to identify and extract themes from the data. The themes were then interpreted to give a greater understanding of the case phenomena. The approach follows practices recommended by Miles and Huberman (1984).

3. Research Site Description

The research site is the International Business Machines (IBM) Software Development Laboratory based at Hursley in the south of the UK. According to IBM’s own website, “IBM e-business software developed in Hursley is critical around the world. Promoting Information Technology is a priority for IBM Hursley” (<http://www-5.ibm.com/uk>). The laboratory employs around 1500 software developers based at the research site. Their work requires them to regularly collaborate with colleagues based in sites across the USA, Canada, and the rest of the world to accomplish their assigned tasks.

The research site exhibited a number of features, some of which have been identified and discussed in previous research.

3.1. Recognition of the value of knowledge

All the interviewees recognised the value of knowledge and its sharing. Line managers would encourage their colleagues to involve themselves in knowledge transfer processes so as to progress professionally and obtain promotion. Technical mentors would spend a lot of time imparting routine business knowledge to new colleagues. Team leaders would guide the employees working in their teams. The team leaders and technical mentors provided technical advice to their colleagues, particularly junior employees, so that everybody could get up to speed and do their jobs properly. In this regard, a software developer remarked:

“I am allowed to ask questions relating to my job. He [a team leader] volunteers to help me. He is one of my colleagues having more experience. We actually have technical mentor, team leader, immediate manager, and manager of managers [second line manager] to help us with technical advice.”

3.2. A supportive knowledge transfer culture

It is argued that a knowledge transfer culture is a precondition for successful knowledge management initiatives in organisations (Leidner, 1999). Respondents indicated that such a culture exists at the laboratory. A second-line manager noted; *“absolutely. Overall culture is very much knowledge sharing. The company wants them to be more collaborative.”*

The majority of the interviewees reported that they engaged in transferring knowledge spontaneously. A manager commented: *“[IBM], in my opinion, is an extreme example of corporate knowledge transfer. We are moving fast with the sharing of knowledge.”* The employees interviewed at the research site were collaborative and open. A software engineer noted:

“If he doesn’t know the answer then he turns around and tells me about others who might know. People are quite open to help each other out.”

The majority of the interviewees reported that people at IBM were inclined to engage themselves in carrying out knowledge transfer. They viewed such tasks as a notable feature of their organization, making it distinctive. For example, a team leader observed:

“In my previous company, people would not tell everything. They were frightened. There I found

people protected their knowledge to protect their job. When I came to [IBM], this is the biggest single difference I found, which is unique: people are very open here. Knowledge is not something that they are worried about sharing. Knowledge transfer helps everybody. Within [IBM] I don't think you ever have to feel alone even if you work something different — it does not matter — people are always there to help.”

A software developer working in the Universal Description Discovery and Integration (UDDI) department pointed out:

“Oh yeah. At the technical level people always like to share knowledge. I don't know whether they want to show off or not. You will find that most of the developers will be happy to share their work and experience with others to do a better job”.

3.3. Organisational values

Ipe (2003) suggests that “organisational values, such as openness, influence knowledge transfer activities” positively affect knowledge transfer. Several other researchers (e.g., Hislop, 2005; Eisenberg and Riley, 2001; von Krogh, 1998) support this view, noting that knowledge-related values such as trust and openness influence knowledge transfer. The respondents in the study reported that they maintained very good relationships with their colleagues, and it was observed that interactions among employees appeared cordial and as well as job-focused.

3.4. Open-door policy

Another observed feature, contributing strongly to the atmosphere of the site, was that office doors were nearly always found open during office hours. Keeping doors open carries an important message: the occupants welcome others to enter. A team leader stated: “*door open means I like to be interrupted*”. A software tester lucidly explained the rationale of the open door:

“We have our doors open pretty much all the time. It is guaranteed that the doors are always open. It is like an open plan. And we have an interactive team. My door is open; it does not bother me to think it is too noisy and distractive. I enjoy being open. I do feel connected to everybody else rather than me being cut off from everyone else.”

3.5. Job security

The respondents reported that they never considered that knowledge transfer would make them vulnerable and eventually translate into, for example, their job loss. One manager remarked:

“I don't see anybody hiding back knowledge because we don't think by transferring knowledge we will diminish in some way. I think it is a natural thing; people are there just to do that [transfer knowledge]. There is no reason not to [transfer]. It is just part of what we need to do.”

The questions arise: why are IBM personnel so enthusiastic about the sharing of knowledge among themselves, and what are the motivators that prompt them to transfer knowledge?

4. Motivation for Knowledge Transfer at IBM

The study revealed that IBM people transfer their knowledge for a variety of reasons. This section of the paper will outline the factors that emerged to induce them to share knowledge, drawing on the relevant literature as appropriate.

4.1. Jobs are interrelated

Broadly, respondents were software developers, computer engineers, or programmers involved in a wide range of activities including development and testing of software, and servicing customers' needs. They wrote instructions and code, stored them in databases, tested developed software, customised it, and revised it regularly, in line with clients' requirements. They would have been unable to do their jobs effectively without transferring knowledge to each other, because they depended upon one another's completed tasks. If any of them fell behind schedule, then others' work would also be delayed. Hence, the respondents have of necessity become collaborative. A manager explained:

“I mean, most of us around could not do our job without knowledge transfer, mainly because we are doing things that are so complicated. If one person is working on one section of a product and another person is working on another section of the same product then we cannot have the product without having the both parts together, so we need to interact.”

There would be no need for knowledge transfer if organisation members were self-sufficient in doing things for

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themselves. But, in the context of the case, the work could not realistically be accomplished single-handedly. In a complex work environment such as this, it is difficult for individual to know everything they need to complete their jobs. Employees are dependent on each other to perform their jobs properly, making it essential to share knowledge among themselves. The pervasiveness of co-dependence caused one software engineer to wonder: “*why should we not transfer our knowledge?*”

4.2. Reciprocity

Interviewees appeared generous in transferring their knowledge within the organisation. A large proportion of the interviewees reported that they did not expect any return for such transfer. A team leader stated: “*it was not the case ‘I am not going to transfer my knowledge if you do not do so.’*” Respondents reported that they never thought to use knowledge as “*a political weapon to bargain*”. A manager remarked: “*I don’t think we are so commercial in knowledge transfer.*” Knowledge-sharing appeared embedded in the corporate culture in the sense that there was tacit, rather than explicit, ‘*give and take*’ reciprocity in its sharing.

Several scholars (e.g., Molam *et al.*, 2000; Hendriks, 1999; Ipe, 2003; Nielsen and Ciabuschi, 2003) argue that reciprocity facilitates the transfer of knowledge. Although the case did not display explicit reciprocity agreements, the principle of reciprocity still appeared to play an important implicit part in transferring knowledge. A team leader stated: “*if we are helpful to somebody we can assume he will also be helpful to us in future.*” Organisation members would help others so as to be able to call upon help from them if they needed it in the future. A manager noted: “*If you give something I think people will also be willing to give you; some kind of mutual benefit that might apply.*” At the case site, an underlying motive to help each other was to set up the conditions for obtaining help in the future. As a respondent explained, “*as a developer, I help a tester when he asks; otherwise I cannot go to him for help any way.*” These findings reinforce those of Ipe (2003, p. 346), who suggests that “reciprocity or the mutual give-and-take of knowledge can facilitate knowledge sharing if individuals see that the value-add to them depends on the extent to which they share their own knowledge with others”.

4.3. Saving time

Collaboration was an important contributor to getting the job done and ensuring efficiency of work. Several interviewees reported that knowledge transfer helped them save

time by enabling them to use solutions that have already been worked out by other members of the organisation. A team leader remarked: “*it [knowledge transfer] makes everybody’s job easier [quicker].*” When a colleague faced a problem, others would come forward to help fix the problem. A team leader explained:

“Increase efficiency of work. We don’t want someone to be wasting their time on a problem that has already been solved. If we find a person is trying to fix it, we usually voluntarily approach to help him. That is the way we actually transfer the knowledge and save our time.”

Helping others with technical advice, facilitates a common goal: getting the job done as quickly as possible. As a software developer stated, “*knowledge transfer helps to get much speed and to avoid problems in future.*” The respondents reported that their knowledge-sharing culture expedited the regular transfer of ideas and knowledge among themselves. An interviewee reflected this view:

“I think a group of people can bring bigger thought than an individual can and somehow they bounce ideas of each other. At some point, these isolated ideas converge into collective knowledge.”

4.4. Building networks

Another factor that induced the IBM employees to carry out the transfer of knowledge was their expectation of building a social network. Ipe (2003, p. 347) argues that “the relationship between the knowledge contributor and the knowledge user is one of the factors that influence the motivation to share knowledge”. We observed that helping each other voluntarily acted to expedite the building up of a network within the organisation. An interviewee remarked: “*the more I help others with technical advice, the more I can expand my network.*” So knowledge transfer helped enhance team spirit through the building of social networks. A CICS team leader commented:

“We have being together working for a number of years. We know each other very well. I think we have team spirit amongst us and we are quite supportive with one another.”

Building relationships and networks were felt to be important for future knowledge transfer. There is a cyclicity to the process: knowledge transfer would help to build social networks which, in turn, would help the organisation members carry out the transfer of knowledge. A

manager remarked:

“You know whose knowledge is valuable to you and they also know that you have valuable knowledge. So you build up a network and from that the information is shared.”

4.5. Career development

It is argued that sharing knowledge helps employees in their career development (Nielsen and Ciabuschi, 2003). At IBM, career prospects were associated with motivation for knowledge transfer. A team leader explained: *“we are encouraged to tell what we really have been doing — engaging in knowledge transfer also helps our careers.”* By becoming an expert and actively promoting the spread of knowledge in a particular area the individual would be valued by the company.

Protecting one's job through hoarding knowledge did not appear to be an issue. Instead, spreading knowledge among the organisation members was seen as helping to protect their jobs. A manager remarked, *“the more known your name is around the Lab, the more likely you will get a better opportunity to develop and advance — knowledge transfer is probably driven by that.”* The impact of knowledge transfer on job security appeared to be viewed positively, rather than negatively. For example, one manager observed:

“Because here nobody is trying to protect his position. Nobody worries about ‘if I tell him that [knowledge] he will take my job’; it isn't like that. People are always very open [collaborative]; if they know something they will tell you. They are not worried about their job here.”

4.6. Showing off

It was reported that a few employees attempted to show themselves as better than others; as a manager said, *“to show off a bit.”* Some of them claimed to do so in order to get management attention: management would view them as more knowledgeable than others and thereby more valuable to the company. Eventually such an individual might become more influential, or at least well known. One software engineer noted: *“by transferring my knowledge to others I am going to look good.”*

4.7. Organizational loyalty

Some of the respondents viewed knowledge transfer as their moral obligation towards the company. Although their knowledge was not exclusively the company's property, they worked for the company, so they considered it

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to be organisational knowledge. Many of the respondents felt that as they would not be serving the organisation forever, it was appropriate to transfer their knowledge to other fellow workers to promote continuity. The following comment from one of the managers interviewed illustrates how organisational loyalty prompted him to transfer knowledge:

“I know a person who possessed knowledge but went on holiday: then others couldn't do much further without him. My understanding is that if I spread it and if I am not there, other members having the similar knowledge can do the same job. Loyalty, yeah. So a dead kind of situation will not emerge. This is the thing that motivates me to share knowledge.”

Such a response understandably appeared more evident in those who had worked for the company for a long time. A few respondents reported that they engaged in transferring knowledge out of duty, no matter whether management encouraged them to do so or not. A team leader stated: *“it is our moral duty to transfer knowledge”*. Another team leader remarked: *“it is just my feeling that it is our responsibility to help others within our organisation if we can.”* A software tester noted:

“Transferring knowledge is to the company's benefit at the end of the day. If no one transfers his secret [knowledge] then the company is not going to get it. If I am doing something in some specific area, if I don't tell it to others then the company is going to lose it.”

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Organisations are increasingly recognising the value of knowledge sharing and transfer as part of a knowledge management strategy which promotes organisational excellence (Steinheider and Al-Hawamdeh, 2004). This paper outlines the motivating factors that emerged from empirical work done in the UK lab of a large multinational organisation. The case may be viewed as an example of an organisation in which a high level of corporate knowledge transfer between staff is the norm. Indeed, it may be regarded as an extreme case. Within the organisation, people are collaborative and discussion oriented. There is no sense that individuals protect their jobs by guarding their knowledge. IBM employees' attitudes towards knowledge transfer appears to be favourable and spontaneous. IBM displays a strong knowledge-sharing culture,

a point made by almost all respondents in the study. Interviewees co-operate in knowledge transfer, viewing their openness as a distinctive feature of their working environment, and symbolised by their “open-door” policy.

The inter-related nature of organisational tasks means that collaboration is important to get the job done. Thus, IBM employees cannot ignore the importance of knowledge transfer. Rather they are compelled to share each other’s knowledge in order to perform their job properly and on time. Similarly, reciprocity, though implicit, is clearly an important issue. Career motivation is also influences people to transfer knowledge — at IBM, participation in knowledge transfer activity is considered to be an important element of the employee appraisal process.

Our study reveals that within the case organisation people engage in knowledge transfer knowledge for six reasons:

- (i) Because jobs are interrelated — no one can do his (her) job without others’ technical help;
- (ii) reciprocity — helping today to get others’ help in future;
- (iii) to save time;
- (iv) to build social networks;
- (v) to achieve career advancement; and
- (vi) organisational loyalty.

The case organisation exhibits a strong degree of congruence between the organisational culture, the promotion of particular work practices by management, the demands of the work, and the motivation of individuals within it. While much of the what we have observed can be attributed to the former three influences, it is also clear that there is a strong degree of ‘enlightened self-interest’ in the knowledge sharing activities of individuals. There were no conflicts observed between individual and other motivators.

This paper has taken a step towards the empirical identification of organisational characteristics which might be seen as motivators of knowledge transfer. Comparison with similar studies in other organisations will help to generalise in broader terms and explore similarities and differences between motivators of knowledge transfer practices. Organisations which do not exhibit such a high degree of congruence regarding motivators (e.g. where individual benefits militate against the sharing of knowledge for organisational good) may be of particular interest.

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