

Predisposition of Workers to Share Knowledge: An Empirical Study

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Abstract Our objective is to determine the factors and obstacles that either contribute or complicate knowledge exchange between workers. This research area is new in Spain, as only three references have been found for firms in China and North America. In our approach to this topic, we apply concepts of a sociological, psychological, and motivational nature, which affect knowledge exchange and sharing and allow us to justify the theoretical basis of this study, as well as its purpose and its organizational benefits. A detailed survey was prepared for the empirical research with 21 questions given to a sample of 557 workers from firms in Burgos. Among the positive factors that contribute to knowledge sharing, the results highlight recognition and an appreciation of the worker's contribution, the work environment and reciprocity. The most important barriers are the poor quality of employment contracts, fellow workers that do not wish to learn, and unfair and disloyal behaviour.

Keywords Knowledge management · Knowledge sharing · Assistance and barriers to knowledge exchange · Employment contract · Work environment · Motivation policies

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1 Introduction

Acceptable use of knowledge and its management within the firm is increasingly gaining ground in the promotion of the strong points with which the organization wishes to compete [19]. However, there are workers who are more or less committed to exchange, in accordance with their personality, the context and their motivation, be it intrinsic or extrinsic, that is provided by the firm [17, 24]. The firm is, therefore, committed to knowing about and taking action on all behaviour and attitudes that favour the exchange of knowledge [6]. Transfer, sharing and management of knowledge within the firm has been considered a process or a function that contributes to the success of the firm, for which purpose general models for exchange have been designed and developed to support this activity [12, 20]. Nevertheless, there are still people and attitudes within the firm who are contrary to knowledge sharing, which is evident from the barriers to the full application of knowledge management [4]. On occasions, such barriers are raised because of the managers and the management style of the firm. Hence, the directors and those responsible for decision taking are key elements, perhaps the most important, so that all employees find their position and share knowledge in the posts where they can best contribute [7, 26]. In this work, as well as studying the purpose and the elements that influence knowledge exchange between workers, an empirical study is conducted, the novelty of which stands out, which has contrasted the positive factors that are likely to promote knowledge sharing and transfer and the barriers that are likely to prevent such activities. The results and conclusions that are reached will help us progress in this area of research and will provide information to firm directors, so that they take more informed decisions that will enable the effective application of knowledge management.

2 Knowledge Exchange Within the Firm

Knowledge sharing and exchange in the workplace is a complex task with all too many links and consequences. Its fundamental objective is to transfer knowledge from its generation to the different places in the firm that need it; it therefore affects organizational survival, prosperity and growth, improving its capability to respond and to take action and making it more competitive. Knowledge management, of which this exchange forms part, bases its function on competitive advantage that is gained with the improvement and the quality of the knowledge of people that help to create new knowledge, in a permanent cycle [9]. Efficient knowledge management means that workers lose their fear of sharing knowledge with other fellow workers [3], in an environment where the system or management style provides and favours the trust and the reciprocity needed for workers to perform their knowledge exchange [23].

The exchange of knowledge has beneficial effects for workers, given that learning is quicker, workers learn what is necessary and gain further experience. Even though it may not be completely assured, because there are other factors with an influence, it also has a beneficial effect on the performance of employees [13]. The creation of an environment of trust with acceptable behaviour improves the exchange of knowledge, acting on the personal emotions, minimizing destructive emotional conflict and assisting a work environment based on mutual trust. All of this is supported by distribution of knowledge and information that motivates exchange and mutual learning [25].

Nevertheless, tacit knowledge is the most difficult to capture and to transfer, because it is non-explicit knowledge or because it can be intentionally concealed by the person who holds it. This type of knowledge might imply a point of negotiation or a guarantee to remain in the firm, because of the exclusivity that it represents, which may even be used as a token for exchange [27].

Despite the beneficial effects of the exchange of knowledge, on occasions, workers deliberately hide and even deny the existence of their knowledge [4], or raise seemingly insurmountable barriers that appear in various forms [14]. In some situations, when the worker does not share knowledge, it is out of a fear of losing the status that the firm has and by which it is valued. In these cases, if the work environment is not conducive to knowledge exchange, the majority of workers will be fearful of doing so [23]. This fear brings to the surface the feeling of being replaceable in the firm, when the exercise of sharing means that the worker loses any exclusive idea of possessing knowledge [23]. In this context, a possible consequence, in the worker's view, is redundancy, with all of its very significant psychological and social consequences [8, 15, 22].

The disastrous economic situation at present means that redundancy is often determined by the shorter employment record of the worker as much as by criteria based on any corresponding compensation for loss of employment [10]. It generates an uneasy situation in which the youngest or the most recently incorporated workers are unjustly disadvantaged [16] and not those who contribute least knowledge. Together with this, the practice of early retirement may imply the loss of more expert workers, who will be replaced by others at a lower level. This retirement is encouraged for purely pecuniary reasons, as the new workers are on considerably lower salaries, with no consideration of the knowledge that it contributes [5, 18].

Incentives and rewards, valuable allies for the correct application of knowledge management, should therefore be offered to alleviate the consequences of these practices in the workplace [21]. With an acceptable design, a supportive and beneficial work environment may be created for knowledge exchange and transfer. Organizations may provide various rewards in multiple forms, such as salary increases, bonuses, stable contracts, opportunities for promotion and other types of benefits for the workers [1].

Bearing in mind cultural, national and other factors linked to where the incentive is created, it has been demonstrated that the organization is, on occasions, more effective in the formation and teaching of its employees, when there is an incentive that rewards that attitude towards learning [11]. However, research also exists that

Table 1 Research data sheet

Sample population	557 workers
Sectors of economic activity	Automobiles, services, energy, agriculture, and livestock
Field	Burgos and province (Spain)
Date of survey	June—October 2012
Design and technical direction	J. I. Díez, L. Sáiz, M. A. Manzanedo
Sources for the preparation of the questionnaire	[2, 4, 14]

proves that the organizational response can have a negative effect on the attitude of the individual towards the exchange of knowledge [1].

3 Empirical Study: Methodology, Justification for the Study, Sample and Questionnaire

The objective of this study is to survey the views and perceptions of workers towards knowledge exchange and sharing within the firm. In other words, the aim is not only to establish whether workers share knowledge in a natural way in their jobs in the firm, but also to establish which, in their opinion, are the drawbacks and barriers that complicate that exchange. The justification for this study is based on the need to know some of the aspects that affect knowledge exchange, from the work environment, the management style, the personality of the individual and the social and interpersonal relations that are found in the workplace.

The sample consists of 557 workers from different firms in the city of Burgos (northwest Spain) and the province of the same name, found in the automobile, services, energy and agricultural and livestock sectors. Further data that are representative of the sample are as follows: workers are contracted by firms with over ten workers and have, on average, two years service, for those within the 18–31-year-old age bracket, ten years of service for those within the 31–45-year-old age bracket, and 20 years service for those older than 46 years old.

An “ad-hoc” questionnaire was designed to gather the data, composed of 21 questions and structured into four sections: (a) general data for the identification of the participants; (b) predisposition to exchange knowledge; (c) human relations and work environment; (d) motivation and incentives to encourage exchange. The questions were drafted with the help of two experts, knowledgeable of the reality of these firms and of the challenges and trials that they have faced in the exchange and sharing of their key knowledge.

Having completed the questionnaires, performed the data treatment and the analysis of the information that had been gathered, the results and the conclusions helped us to identify barriers to knowledge sharing and incorporated recommendations of interest on how to increase and to improve the exchange of knowledge in the firm (Table 1).

Table 2 Aspects that support and that prevent knowledge sharing

Aspects that support sharing	(%)	Aspects that prevent sharing	(%)
Recognition and appreciation	24.5	Unstable contract	17.2
Good work environment	14.2	Fellow workers who do not wish to learn	15.2
Reciprocity	16.1	Disloyal fellow workers	14.6
Stable contract	9.7	Lack of recognition and appreciation	14.5
Remuneration	8.9	Bad work environment	13.3
Labour responsibility	8.4	Bad relation with fellow workers	9.6
Business organization	7.1	Unfairness of salary or in decision-making	7.3
Communication with management	4.7	Pressure or bullying	4.2
Fair firm	3.3	Badly organized firm	4.1
Job security	3.1		

4 Results and Conclusions

This study has summarised its results, in particular, those that refer to situations or aspects that support knowledge sharing within the firm and equally those that prevent it or complicate it. Moreover, it reflects the predisposition of workers to share knowledge and the incentives that encourage behaviour that will support knowledge exchange within the firm. The descriptive results are presented as frequencies and percentages, to facilitate a clear understanding (Table 2).

With respect to the predisposition of the worker to share knowledge, the results revealed that 80.3% would be willing to teach others, provided that the people they teach do not appropriate their ideas, and 40.4% would not share it with fellow workers unfairly assessed as better than them. If workers considered themselves poorly valued or underused, which implies a lack of motivation, they would not share their knowledge. Moreover, if the acquisition of such knowledge had implied a significant effort, 29.4% of individuals would not share it. Reciprocity in the transmission of knowledge emerged as an essential element for knowledge exchange, given that 38.8% would not transfer their knowledge if others did not do likewise.

The leading incentives for knowledge transfer were, for 72% of interviewees, an organizational structure that promotes and facilitates sharing knowledge and know-how; the existence of a stable contract in 65% of cases; and 34% responded positively to the idea of additional remuneration for passing knowledge on to others.

We may deduce from these results that the study has revealed some unknown factors in relation to the exchange and the sharing of knowledge. By means of an empirical study that used primary information (from 557 workers in different firms), we tested the elements and opportunities that supported knowledge transfer in the workplace, as well as its obstacles and limitations. The most prominent aspects are recognition and appreciation of the worker by the firm, up to the point that when this recognition is lacking, a highly demotivating situation is generated, not only for knowledge sharing, but also to be efficient and to contribute value to the function in question. Another relevant element is a work environment oriented towards knowledge sharing, as in situations of conflict, there is a lack of clarity in the assignation

of tasks and objectives and little or no consideration of the worker, which is demotivating and provokes passive attitudes with little or no involvement in improvements made to the job. Mutual reciprocity is a further element that favours exchange and notably influences human behaviour, it being a quality that affects, in a significant way, not only the quantity, but also the quality of valuable knowledge exchange.

In turn, the poor quality of employment contracts are found among the barriers that, more than any other, complicate knowledge sharing between workers. A direct tie between the quality of the contract and knowledge exchange has been confirmed; fellow workers unwilling to learn or showing unjust and disloyal behaviour represent an added problem given that it is an intentional attempt to render the exchange inoperative, either by the negation to acquire more knowledge or by not using what has been acquired.

This study has also served to establish certain factors that influence the predisposition of the worker to share knowledge, which are maintenance of knowledge ownership, fair valuation of the work carried out by everybody, and the fact that others share and interact with their knowledge. The motivating elements or most prominent incentives to achieve efficient exchange reside in an appropriate organizational structure, stable contracts and specific remunerative complements for those who share knowledge.

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