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Original Research Paper

Why Should I Share: A Study of Knowledge Sharing in the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

The possession of valuable knowledge provides companies with sustained competitive advantage over competitors. The success of knowledge management initiatives by organizations hinges on the knowledge sharing behavior of its people. Using the framework of social exchange theory, we examined the effects of organizational rewards and perceived benefits to the team on employees' knowledge sharing with their team members. The research model was validated through an online survey of 198 respondents working with high-technology firms in India. Consistent with expectations, both organizational rewards and perceived benefits to the team significantly impacted people's knowledge sharing.

Keywords: *knowledge sharing, organizational rewards, benefits to the team*

In the twenty-first century, technological revolutions as well as increasing globalization through deregulation of markets have been continually driving business towards hyper competition (DeNisi, Hitt, & Jackson, 2003; Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998). To remain relevant in this new competitive landscape, organizations must find smarter and more innovative ways of producing and distributing goods and services (OECD, 2000). While some innovations are the outcome of the application of new knowledge, others result from reconfiguring existing knowledge to create "architectural innovations" (Grant, 1996b). Such flurry of innovations driving the economy calls for an appraisal of the firm as a knowledge creating entity (Nonaka, Byosiere, Borucki, & Konno, 1994). The knowledge-based view of the firm treats knowledge as the most strategically important of the firm's resources (Grant, 1996a). Since knowledge resources are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable and not easily substitutable, possession of such resources endows a firm with sustained competitive advantage over its current and potential competitors (Barney, 1991).

In the knowledge-based theories of the firm (Grant, 1996b; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Spender, 1996), the individual has been accorded the central role in the knowledge creation process. According to Nonaka (1994), at a fundamental level, knowledge is created by

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individuals. It is not possible for an organization to create knowledge without individuals. Knowledge is created when individuals with different types and content of knowledge interact among themselves (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The clearest manifestation of the social aspect of knowledge creation can be observed in problem-solving teams. These teams perform complex, difficult and dynamic tasks that require the coordination of diverse sets of expertise. Since they have to deal with high degrees of uncertainty and information ambiguity, they must generate new rules for tackling unprecedented scenarios. The decision environment in which such teams operate are characterized by severe time pressure, high short-time memory demands and requirement to make several complex decisions simultaneously (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Converse, 1993).

The success of a team's effort in building knowledge objects and artifacts depends to a very great extent on the knowledge sharing behavior of team members (Bock, Kim, Zmud, & Lee, 2005). Knowledge sharing has been defined in the literature as "the provision of task information and know-how to help others and to collaborate with others to solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement policies or procedures" (Wang & Noe, 2010, p. 117). In the context of the definition, the willingness of the knowledge provider assumes preeminence in the 'flow' of knowledge between the provider and the seeker. Unless an individual is willing to share his knowledge with his team members, it will remain unavailable for the appropriation and use by the team (Bock et al., 2005; Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). Knowledge sharing cannot be forced but can only be encouraged and facilitated (Gibbert & Krause, 2002).

The personal, intimate nature of knowledge and the supreme importance of knowledge provider's volition in the sharing process have driven researchers and practitioners alike to look for factors that thwart or aid knowledge sharing. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) has been used extensively to explain why people would choose to share their knowledge with others or withhold the same from them. According to this theory, people engage in social interaction if they perceive the benefits arising from such interaction to override the concomitant costs. Two decades of research shows that perceived benefits are positively associated with knowledge sharing whereas perceived costs have a negative influence on the same (Wang & Noe, 2010). Individuals see value in spending time and effort for knowledge sharing when they feel such acts will bring some benefit to themselves or their beneficiaries (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005). Previous research has indicated that personal costs such as loss of one's unique value by giving away knowledge (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Renzl, 2008), lack of time (Hew & Hara, 2008), evaluation apprehension (Bordia, Irmer, & Abusah, 2007) and fear of conflict (Lu, Zhou, & Leung, 2011) deter knowledge sharing whereas expectation of organizational rewards (Kankanhalli et al., 2005, Kim & Lee, 2006; Taylor, 2006), enhanced professional reputation (Bordia et al., 2006; Cho, Chen, & Chung, 2010; Constant, Kiesler & Sproull, 1994; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), personal satisfaction from helping others (Kankanhalli et al, 2005; Lin, 2007; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) and community interests (Constant et al., 1994; Wasko & Faraj, 2000) motivate people to share knowledge with others.

Researchers have argued that the expectation of rewards and incentives is a potent motivator to induce people to share knowledge. Several academicians have recommended the use of organizational rewards to boost knowledge sharing by employees (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Leibowitz, 2003; Nelson, Sabatier, & Nelson, 2006). However, research efforts exploring the impact of rewards on actual knowledge sharing have produced mixed results. In a study of knowledge contribution to electronic knowledge repositories, Kankanhalli et al. (2005) found that organizational reward had a significant positive relationship with knowledge contribution when interests of knowledge providers merged with the interests of the organization. Kim and Lee (2006), in their study of public and private sector employees from Korea, found that performance-based reward systems positively affected employees' knowledge sharing capabilities. Taylor (2006) also found that financial incentives affected knowledge sharing in computer mediated environments. However, findings from other studies point in a different direction. Bock et al.'s (2005) study, conducted on a sample of knowledge workers from Korea, for instance, defied traditional expectations associated with knowledge management practices to show that in reality extrinsic rewards hinder rather than promote the development of positive attitude towards knowledge sharing. According to the authors, external rewards may frustrate people's intrinsic motivation to share knowledge. Although task-contingent rewards may secure temporary compliance, they may in practice stymie the favorable attitude toward the task. Kwok and Gao (2005) too found that extrinsic motivators exerted no impact on an individual's attitude towards knowledge sharing. Chang, Yeh, and Yeh (2007) also showed that outcome-based rewards as well as reward for effort had limited impact on knowledge sharing of product development team members.

Several studies have cited generic benefits to the community or organization to be an important motivation behind people's knowledge sharing effort (Constant, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1996; Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Wasko & Teigland, 2004). Constant et al. (1996) studied the volume and usefulness of responses to messages requesting technical information over the company-wide intranet of a Fortune 500 computer manufacturing organization. The researchers found that respondents cited both personal benefits as well general organizational benefits as reasons for information sharing; however they cited the latter more frequently than the former. Reasons such as "Answering questions like this is part of being a good company citizen" and "It's part of my job to answer questions like this" ranked higher in preferences than reasons such as earning respect or company rewards. In addition, the researchers found that organizational motivations of information providers predicted the usefulness of their technical help. In a study of three electronic communities of practice pertaining to software programming, Wasko and Faraj (2000) found that members frequently referred to community interests as an important motive behind participation in the collective. Helping behavior followed from the conviction that members have a moral responsibility towards the upkeep and growth of the professional community, even when doing so may require one to make small personal sacrifices. In this sense, the authors argue, knowledge sharing over a free community takes the form of pro-social or altruistic behavior. Members'

personal experiences of having been in the same boat may have stirred in them the need to extend their help to others, as also a firm belief that sharing one's personal knowledge with those in need is the 'right thing to do', since such acts tend to bring composite returns for all. In the same vein, Wasko and Teigland (2004) argue that the sense of personal responsibility for creating and sustaining public good relevant to one's own practice tends to be a strong influencer for knowledge sharing.

On the basis of the preceding literature review, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. Expectation of organizational rewards will have a positive effect on knowledge sharing with the team.

H2. Perceived benefits to the team will have a positive effect on knowledge sharing with team members.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Overall, 198 respondents participated in the study. The demographic profile of the participants is presented in Table I.

Table I: Demographic profile of participants

Demographic characteristics	Levels	N	%
Gender	Male	136	69
	Female	62	31
Age (yrs) (Mean=31.76, SD=4.48)	≤25 years	7	3.5
	26-30 years	85	42.9
	31-35 years	74	37.4
	36-40 years	24	12.1
	>40 years	8	4.1
Educational qualification	Engineering Graduate	115	58.1
	Master's degree in Management	46	23.2
	Engineering Graduate + Master's degree in Management	10	5.1
	Master's degree in Science	8	4
	Master's degree in Engineering	17	8.6
	PhD	2	1
Overall experience (yrs) (Mean=8.74, SD=4.06)	≤5 years	40	20.2
	6-10 years	95	48
	11-15 years	55	27.8
	>15 years	8	4
Organizational tenure (Mean=5.1, SD=2.71)	< 2 years	35	18
	2 -5 years	91	46
	6-10 years	66	33
	>10 years	6	3
Organizational position	Junior management	89	44.9
	Middle management	97	49
	Senior management	12	6.1

Instruments

Dependent variable

Knowledge sharing was assessed with five items adapted from Bock et al. (2005). A sample item is "I share my work reports and official documents frequently with members of my team". Respondents reported their knowledge sharing by responding to a five-point Likert – type response format that ranged from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5). The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .95.

Independent variables

1. *Organizational rewards:* Organizational rewards was assessed with four items adapted from Kankanhalli et al. (2005). A sample item is "It is important to get a higher salary when I share my knowledge with my team members." Responses ranged from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5). The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .91.
2. *Benefits to the team:* To measure benefits to the team, we developed a scale consisting of eight items to be answered on a five-point scale ranging from Strongly disagree (1) to Strongly agree (5). A sample item of this scale is "Sharing my knowledge with team members improves the quality of group decisions". The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was .95.

Control variables

Previous literature suggests that gender (Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2000) and work experience (Constant et al., 1994) may affect knowledge sharing behavior. Therefore, these variables were included in our study as control variables.

Procedure

Data were collected online using the researchers' personal network. The questionnaire was uploaded on an online survey platform. Using LinkedIn, a social networking site for professionals, we contacted potential respondents working with high-technology firms in India. A detailed letter requesting participation in the study was sent to people in our network. In the letter, it was explicitly mentioned that participation was sought only from people who were part of one or more problem-solving teams. After the respondents gave their consent to participate, they were sent the link to the survey.

A detailed set of general instructions appeared on the first page of the online questionnaire. After briefly describing 'knowledge' in the professional context, the respondents were explained about the questionnaire and the rating scale. The questionnaire began with demographic information of the participants. The main body of the questionnaire comprised of three sections – Section I was dedicated to knowledge sharing, Section II to rewards, Section III to benefits to the team. To boost response, a reminder message was sent out after a week to respondents who were yet to fill the survey.

RESULTS

The means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations for all variables are presented in Table 2. A significant positive relationship *(r=.22, p<.01)* was observed between work experience and knowledge sharing. Organizational rewards had a significant positive relationship *(r=.43, p<.01)* with knowledge sharing as did benefits to the team *(r=.58, p<.01).* Knowledge sharing differed across genders, with independent-samples t-test indicating that males *(M=4.37)* shared more knowledge than females *(M=4.10), t=2.48, p<.05*. There was also significant gender difference in terms of work experience. Male respondents in our sample *(M=10.28)* had higher total years of work experience than females *(M=5.37), t=11.85, p<.001*. Organizational rewards had a significant positive relationship with benefits to the team *(r=.53, p<.01).*

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Gender	-	-				
2. Work experience	8.74	4.05	.56**			
3. Organizational rewards	4.03	.77	.03	.09		
4. Benefits to the team	4.27	.65	-.03	.02	.53**	
5. Knowledge sharing	4.29	.75	.17*	.22**	.43**	.58**

*N=198 *p<0.05(two-tailed), **p<0.01 (two-tailed)*

Construct validity

Construct validity refers to the extent to which a scale measures the theoretical variable of interest. Following Straub's (1989) approach for validating instruments in the Information Sciences research, we evaluated the construct validity of our measures by assessing their convergent and discriminant validity.

To test construct validity, we performed item analysis as well as factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation and varimax rotation. For convergent validity, we evaluated item-to-total correlations, i.e., the correlation of each item with the sum of the remaining items. Discriminant validity was assessed by examining the factor loadings for each item. All items had item-total correlations above 0.5. Factor analysis yielded three factors with eigenvalues above 1. All the factor loadings exceeded 0.70, meaning that more than one-half of the variance was accounted by loading on a single factor (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Moreover, in each case, the discrepancy between the primary and the secondary loadings was sufficiently high (>0.3) (Matsunga, 2010). Thus, it may be concluded that all the measures demonstrated adequate construct validity. No items were dropped due to factor analysis. The results of factor analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Rotated factor matrix

Item	Factor		
	1	2	3
Benefits to the team 1	.775	.354	.224
Benefits to the team 2	.802	.225	.259
Benefits to the team 3	.792	.149	-.033
Benefits to the team 4	.802	.289	.254
Benefits to the team 5	.717	.339	.326
Benefits to the team 6	.754	.253	.286
Benefits to the team 7	.782	.186	.311
Benefits to the team 8	.817	.318	.252
Rewards 1	.197	.042	.833
Rewards 2	.274	.175	.886
Rewards 3	.255	.272	.749
Rewards 4	.188	.260	.758
Knowledge sharing 1	.324	.794	.244
Knowledge sharing 2	.245	.887	.163
Knowledge sharing 3	.311	.806	.155
Knowledge sharing 4	.244	.799	.168
Knowledge sharing 5	.240	.887	.151
Eigenvalues	5.470	4.261	3.305
% of variance explained	32.176	25.064	19.443
Cumulative %	32.176	57.241	76.684

Results of hypothesis testing

We performed a hierarchical regression analysis to test the relationship between organizational rewards, benefits to the team and knowledge sharing. The control variables were entered in the first step, followed by organizational rewards and benefits to the team. The results for the regression analysis are depicted in Table 4.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis for predictors of knowledge sharing

Predictor Variable	Step 1			Step 2		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Gender	.11	.14	.07	.17	.11	.10
Experience	.03*	.02	.18*	.03*	.01	.14*
Organizational rewards				.15*	.06	.15*
Benefits to the team				.58***	.08	.50***
Change in R^2						.36
F change						58.12***
R^2			.05			.41
Adjusted R^2			.04			.40
F			5.54**			33.46***

**p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<.001*

The R^2 value of 0.41 and adjusted R^2 value of 0.40 (F=33.46, p<.001) indicated that the overall model was satisfactory in explaining the variance in knowledge sharing by knowledge

contributors. The change of R^2 value between the two steps was 0.36 (change in F=58.12, p<.001), indicating that organizational rewards and benefits to the team significantly predicted knowledge sharing above the effect of control variables. Expectation of organizational rewards (*β=.15, t=2.28, p<0.05)* had a significant influence on knowledge sharing with the team, supporting hypothesis I. The second motivational factor in our study, perceived benefits to the team (*β=.50, t=7.71, p<.001)* too had a significant effect on knowledge sharing with team members, supporting hypothesis 2. Thus, the positive impact of motivators on knowledge sharing has been confirmed in our study. The inclusion of the control variables significantly improved the model over the intercept-only model *(F=5.54, p<.01).* Total years of experience positively predicted knowledge sharing with the team (*β=.14, t=2.07, p<.05).*

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to add to the existing wisdom on the motivators of knowledge sharing in organizations. Accordingly, we studied the impact of organizational rewards and perceived benefits to the team on respondents' knowledge sharing behavior. Our results demonstrated the impact of both the motivators on knowledge sharing. According to the social exchange theory, individuals weigh expectations of rewards against costs when making behavioral choices. Knowledge sharing incurs costs to the provider in terms of the effort expended in the sharing act. When people spend time with others to share their fund of tacit knowledge or when they create knowledge artifacts for the posterity through codification, they have chosen not to allocate that time in pursuit of more profitable activities for themselves. Knowledge sharing also makes one poorer by taking away the unique value one commands from the ownership of knowledge. When private knowledge becomes public, the power associated with the unique knowledge also disappears. Therefore, knowledge providers must feel safe that the rewards they will gain from knowledge sharing will compensate for the costs that will be incurred in the process. Expectation of financial and non-financial incentives helps providers make the rational, economic choice in favor of knowledge sharing. As the results of our study suggest, organizational rewards help mitigate the costs of knowledge sharing, thereby inducing people to share their valuable knowledge with others.

Our study also shows that benefit to one's team is a compelling reason to motivate people to part away with a fraction of their knowledge. Our findings are in line with previous studies (Wang, 2004; Wasko & Teigland, 2004), where it had been reported that people's knowledge sharing behaviors were driven in part by an ethical concern for the team. People felt knowledge sharing was a part of workplace ethics and that it was only natural to help one's team members. In the past, knowledge sharing has been likened to public goods dilemma (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2002), where the provider makes personal sacrifice to create public goods accessible to all. However, anybody creating public goods is vulnerable to certain risks. Apart from the personal costs that arise from sharing, one is also vulnerable to the opportunism of free-riders, who enjoy the benefits of contribution by others without personally making any offerings to the community. Despite these threats, a strong sense of

responsibility towards the subsistence, maintenance and well-being of the team will make knowledge providers ignore the costs and opt instead for the voluntary act of sharing. People who feel an obligation to equip the team to produce outstanding results will feel no inhibition in sharing their knowledge with others. A strong sense of identity with the group likely inspires people to put their team before their selves, making them invest the necessary time and effort in its furtherance. Thus, a firm commitment to the welfare and prosperity of the team translates into pro-social behavior in the form of knowledge sharing with team members (Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

Although we made no significant assumptions regarding the role of gender or experience in explaining knowledge sharing, our results provided some interesting insights about our control variables. In our study, male respondents shared more knowledge than their female counterparts. People with higher work experience too shared more knowledge than those with fewer years of experience. Prior research has revealed that male and female employees perceive their organization's knowledge sharing culture differently. Female employees must perceive a more positive social interaction culture in order to deem their organization's culture as conducive to knowledge sharing than their male counterparts (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003). The authors hinted that such a difference in perception could be attributed to the influence of gender on communication styles. Female participants in our study might have perceived their respective organization's culture as less friendly and favorable to personal relationships than the male participants, which could explain the difference in the extent of knowledge sharing. Or the perception of glass ceiling could have made the women more conscious of the power linked to their personal knowledge, and the benefits accruing from knowledge sharing were not enough to motivate them to part with their knowledge. However, more importantly, the male respondents in our sample had greater work experience than the females. We did not control for seniority level in our study. Experience likely gives people more confidence in their knowledge. People with longer work experience are also likely to hold higher positions in the organizational hierarchy, as a consequence of which they are likely to command more authority and power over other team members, and listened to more than the junior staff members. It may also be possible that higher work experience brings more technical expertise and sophistication. Findings from hidden profile experiments suggest that experienced members judge themselves to be more task competent than those with lesser experience (Wittenbaum, 2000). The belief in their own task expertise gives experienced members the confidence to share information openly with others. At the same time, experienced members are viewed as more task competent by others and ascribed higher status, making it easier for them to exchange more unshared information than members with relatively lower status. Therefore, the difference in knowledge sharing by male and female respondents in our study may have arisen *not* due to actual gender difference, but from sampling bias, rendering one group to possess more experience than another. Future research should incorporate seniority level as a control variable and investigate whether the same relationships still endure.

The findings of our study should be interpreted in the light of its limitations. Since our data was cross-sectional and not longitudinal in nature, the causal relationships posited in the study, although based on sound theoretical grounds, could only be inferred rather than proven. We adopted convenience sampling for our study, which is vulnerable to biases arising from self-selection, pre-existing differences and other polluting influences beyond the control of the researcher. Convenience samples have been suspect of not being representative of the general population (c.f. Mackey & Gass, 2005). All the above potentially limit the generalizability of our study's findings. Further, our study is vulnerable to common method bias arising from the use of self-report measures, which may inflate relationships among variables (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff & Todor, 1985). Future research should adopt more robust methodological approaches as well as employ objective criteria and measures such as supervisory ratings.

Our study makes some significant contributions to theory and practice. Findings of our study add to the wisdom gleaned from a burgeoning body of literature on the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors of knowledge sharing. The administration of rewards to encourage knowledge sharing has been a contentious issue, albeit many firms reportedly endorsing the practice. By lending credence to the position that rewards help the cause of knowledge sharing, our study is a step towards finding a final answer to the confusion surrounding the issue. Although several studies have been conducted in the past on the factors of knowledge sharing, to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study exploring the role of rewards and benefits to the team in the Indian context. We expect similar studies to follow, and examine whether the professed relationships in other cultures hold good in the Indian culture too. We developed a scale to measure benefits to the team and established its construct validity. Subsequent studies should investigate the psychometric soundness of the scale under various contexts and for diverse populations. Our study provides insight to the practitioner community on the actions to be taken to facilitate knowledge flow within the organization, to build and sustain a knowledge sharing culture as well as design knowledge management strategies around the centrality of the individual. Managers may consider the use of rewards such as lucrative work assignments, promotions and payments to persuade employees to contribute their knowledge. Of no less importance is the need to foster we-feeling and emotional bonding within the team, which will cause people to identify with the needs of their team, regard their own sacrifices as negligible, and assume personal responsibility for the team's outcome. Managers should strive to create an environment of openness and trust based on mutual respect and reciprocation, since knowledge sharing most often flourishes under such invigorating environments.

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