

The Effect of Socio-Cultural Diversity on Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract

Knowledge sharing, perhaps knowledge management tops the headlines of today's organizational news. As the old adage goes "knowledge cannot be found in one man's head"; therefore, employees should share their knowledge. While individuals in organizations might be cognizant with the strength in diversity and the significance of sharing their experiences, it is no news that employees loath the act of sharing their knowledge especially to people of different social group. This issue has been examined by many researchers. As the behavior individuals' exhibit in varied circumstances hinges greatly on the social environment in which they find themselves, their level of participation or willingness towards sharing knowledge might also not be different. Thus, we hypothesize those certain socio cultural factors: nepotism, tribalism, openness to diversity and cronyism may have influence on individuals' knowledge sharing behavior.

Keywords: Cronyism, Nepotism, Tribalism, Openness to Diversity, Knowledge Sharing

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management, more specifically, knowledge sharing has been interpreted as one of the very important features that help creating value and clinching success for an organization (Lahti and Beyerlein (2000). In this current era, most firms such as Xerox, IBM, Federal Express, Honda and others have made a pragmatic strategy swing from hardware based to knowledge based (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). Researchers suggested that organizations are benefiting from implementing knowledge management paraphernalia as it improves efficiency and effectiveness.

There is a Ghanaian adage that, "Knowledge or wisdom cannot be found in one person's mind". This adage suggests that comparing and sharing different thoughts and ideas is always better. Ghana is seen to be one of the countries in Africa that has rich cultures with almost about thirty two (32) ethno-tribal lines. Diversity is seen to be strength for a country's development but with Ghana it is seen as a detriment. The post political independence era of the nation's history has seen the ripple effect of diversity where citizens in the country have been divided based on ethnic and tribal lines. It is believed that individuals who are polarized on ethnic grounds would also extend it to work places where knowledge, experiences and other ideas would be exchanged based on cultural sentiments. Prior studies have extensively investigated knowledge sharing; however, only few studies have deductively looked at the influence of these social-cultural factors; nepotism, tribalism, cronyism, and openness to diversity on knowledge sharing. A study on this gap may shed further lights on the reasons why employees feel reluctant to share their knowledge to people from other culture, belief and orientation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge, Knowledge Management And Knowledge Sharing

Defining knowledge has been of a puzzle since time in memorial. Some researchers have categorized it based on the relationship that it has with data and information (Fahey and Prusak, 1998). Moreover, other writers have made a conscious effort to define it. Knowledge is an acceptable truth (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Another researcher sees knowledge as “a fluid mixed of flamed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).

Verily, because defining knowledge is quiet exigent, perhaps some researchers have classified it based on the relationship that it has with data and information. Thus it is quite imperative to discuss the distinction between knowledge, information and data. According to Becerra-Fernandez (2004) data are raw facts and figures of an object or event. This defines data as something “crude” i.e. something with no comprehension or insight. Contrastingly, information is data that have insight, context, relevance and can be manipulated. According to Becerra-Fernandez et al., (2004), knowledge, information and data are of the same hierarchy but knowledge is the worthiest among them. Knowledge is needed to make meanings out of data (Becerra-Fernandez et al, 2004).

According to Bhatt (1998), knowledge management is to utilize, discover, distribute and absorb internal and external knowledge of the organization through management tools to achieve foreseeable outcome. Its importance to an organization is multi-functional. The idea was first used by Karl Wiig when he was addressing the United Nation’s International Labour Organization in 1986. In another definition, knowledge management can be termed as the act of finding, selecting, sharing information and providing expertise essential for organizational activities (Gupta et al, 2000).

Barriers of knowledge sharing

Factors that bare the activities of knowledge sharing can be categorized into three i.e., individual, organisational and technological. On the individual factors, Riege (2005) proposes that to share tacit knowledge, individuals need to have experience and the need for constant interaction between the parties. Lack of ample time frame of exchange between the receiver and the sender of the knowledge was also identified as a barrier. Lack of good communication and lack of interpersonal skills are identified as factors that influence individuals’ knowledge sharing behavior. Moreover, Riege (2005) posit trust as one of the most important factors that influence individuals to share their knowledge. In another literature review work examining individual factors and knowledge sharing concluded that reciprocity, self-efficacy, altruism, personality, and Machiavellianism have a positive significant effect on knowledge sharing (Ben-Ner et al, 2002; Okyere-kwakye et.al 2011; Endres et.al 2007; Lin 2008).

Also, the following literatures argue that an individual is knowledge sharing behavior is affected by demographical factors. A study conducted by Miller and Karakowsky (2000) denotes that there are differences among women and men when soliciting knowledge. Women are found to exert more effort in seeking knowledge than men. Pangil and Nashrudin (2008) indicate that gender has an influence on how individuals share their knowledge. Imar, Bordia and Abusah (2005) suggest that females share more knowledge than men because women benefit from sharing their knowledge. Also a study by Gumus (2007) found that age has an influence on knowledge sharing. Keyes (2008) also discovered that there is a correlation between a person’s age and knowledge sharing.

Using virtual communities, Chiu et al (2006) conducted a study to investigate the factors that enhance individuals' motivation of knowledge sharing. This research shows that social interaction ties, reciprocity, and identification increase individuals' quantity of knowledge sharing but not knowledge quality. Meanwhile, in their study, trust does not have a significant relationship with knowledge sharing quality. In another related studies on community of practice and knowledge sharing, Huang et al (2008) found that there is a positive significant relationship between the individual cognitive factors, environmental factors such as trust, self-efficacy and IS success and individuals intentions to share knowledge in a virtual communities.

On the organisational factors a study conducted by Lau et al. (2008) indicates that organization team innovation climate and job characteristics have a significant influence on knowledge sharing. A research conducted by Tsai (2001) suggests that organizational climate and individuals goals have a significant influence on knowledge sharing. In addition, the results of the study indicated that goal setting can influence individuals' self-efficacy and self-regulation. In another study, Lin (2008) attempts to investigate the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior, gender and knowledge sharing in workplace using five constructs i.e., altruism, courtesy, consciousness and civic virtues as organizational citizenship behavioral factors (OCB) and gender as a moderating factor. The study unveils that altruism for women to share knowledge is stronger than men. However, the construct courtesy and sportsmanship on knowledge sharing are stronger for men as compared to women.

Govindasama (1999) conducted a research on factors affecting organizational commitment of knowledge workers in Malaysia using the constructs: knowledge sharing practices, task orientation, and fairness of performance management, promotion, opportunity of training and development and compensation. The results show that training and development and compensation system have a significant influence on the commitment of knowledge workers. However, the effect of organizational practice and fairness of performance management was not supported. In another study Liao et al (2004) investigates' employee relationship and knowledge sharing. Questionnaire was used to collect the data from the respondents. They concluded that the success of knowledge sharing in an organization does not only depend on technologies but also on individuals behaviour.

In a literature study, Oliver and Kandadi (2006) attempt to investigate the factors that may influence the development of knowledge management culture in organizations. They suggest ten factors that have positive influence on the development of knowledge culture. These factors are: leadership, organizational structure, evangelization, communities of practice, reward systems, time allocation, business processes, recruitment, infrastructure and physical attributes.

A study conducted by Hoegl and Schulze (2005) examine the relationship between organizational knowledge creation process i.e., socialization, internalization and the generation of new ideas. The research concludes that there is a significant relationship between knowledge creation and the process of generating new ideas.

On the effect of technological factors on knowledge sharing, Lee & Al-Hawamdeh (2002) suggest that technology is the basic prerequisite of knowledge sharing. Technology is the means by which knowledge is exchanged and transferred from one point to the other. In essence technology acts as the life wire for information flow in the organization (Gurteen, 1999). Identifying the technological factors that influence knowledge sharing, Riege (2005) proposes 7 technological barriers that hinder people from sharing knowledge which include:

1. Lack of information technology process and system integration which limit employees to work.
2. Lack of internal and external technology support.
3. Unrealistic expectation what technology can do and cannot do.
4. Mismatch between technological needs, systems integration and information
5. technology processes.
6. Reluctant to use information technology because of unfamiliarity.
7. Lack of training to get use to new information technology systems and processes.
8. Lack of communication and usage of new system advantages compared to current system.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Categorization Theory

Social Categorization Theory states that individuals seek to attain and preserve their desired self identity by joining groups or sub-groups based on shared characteristics such as identical skin colour, language, ethnicity and culture (Carte and Chidambaram, 2004). As a result of this cleavage, individuals with dissimilar characteristics will be neglected and seen unappealing to commune with (Mor-Barak & Cherin, 1998; Loden and Rosener, 1991). Based on this groups people may see themselves to be part of the caucus and the dissimilar people to be out of the group which will consequensely culminate biases towards the similar group members. In a similar context, Stephenson and Lewin (1996) also state that, individuals generally prefer to interact with others of the same gender or race. The theory of categorization highlights the premise that an individual would like to always attached himself or herself to others who have similar features such as skin colour, eye colour and other visible outlook other would also make a cleavage base on language, culture and other inconspicuous features. Lots of research in the diversity domain mostly used SCT as its underpinning theory. This study selects the SCT as a theoretical support for the constructs tribalism, openness to diversity, nepotism, and cronyism which seem to have their bases from social categorization theory. SCT seems suitable to be used as a supportive theory for this study.

Research framework and Hypotheses development

The research framework in Figure 1 is formulated based on review of previous studies that portray these factors (tribalism, openness to diversity, nepotism and cronyism) to be important factors of knowledge sharing. These factors were selected based on their relationship with Social Categorization Theory (SCT). Four variables are chosen to represent the four hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, and H4) in the research model and would be empirically tested. The next paragraphs present discussion that supports development of the hypotheses in the research model.

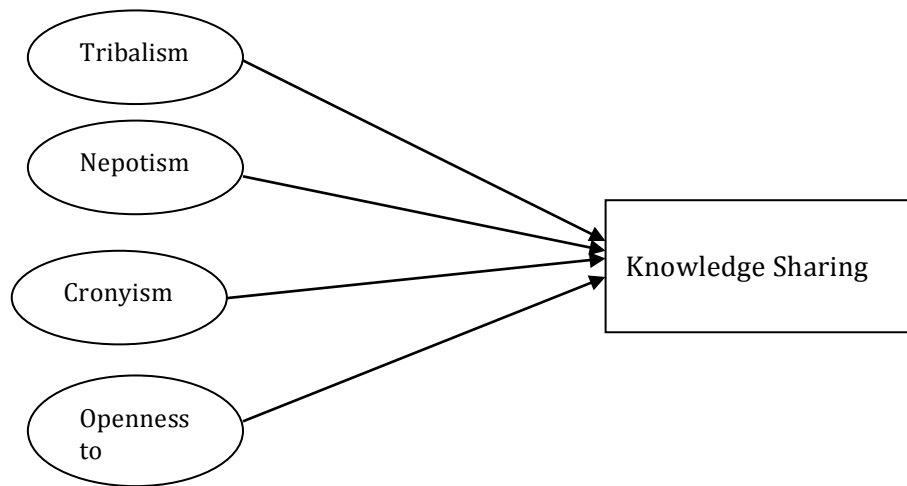


Figure.1 A proposed research model of relationship between nepotism, tribalism, cronyism, openness to diversity and knowledge sharing.

METHODOLOGY

Tribalism

Tribalism has been an issue of concern since time in memorial. It is no news that currently social commentators and other sociological researchers consider its existence as a rage to society and the world as a whole. Looking at the predicament in Yugoslavia, flashback on the brutes of Rwanda i.e., Hutus and tosses ethnic cleansing and the revolution of the Biasa war in Nigeria, not to even mention the war between the Abudus and the Adanis in Ghana illustrates the contribution of tribalism to the problems of this world.

The term tribalism has received numerous attentions but it is quite unfortunate that only a few literatures can be found on the relationship between tribalism, nepotism and knowledge sharing. Tribalism is a group of individuals who share the same culture, identity and security (Jawhar, 2005; Nauta et al., 2001). The term tribalism was originated from the word tribe which represent a group of people with the same appearance who share the same culture and identity. Due to the resemblance in the appearance, culture and other identities, members of the tribe may strive hard to make sure that the culture, name, and other atheistic of the tribe survives notwithstanding the level of education or status (Price and Cybulski, 2007).

Knowledge sharing is the transfer of ideas, experience and expertise from one point to the other. Researchers have identified that individuals, to some extent consider their knowledge as power or a commodity for which lend them to put certain factors into consideration when sharing. Hutcheon (2009) may put it that individuals feel good when sharing and serving in the mist of his or her people. He continues to argue that people may sacrifice even their life to preserve the life of their offsprings and the other family members' offspring for tribal perpetuation. Looking at it from a broader view, one can argue that in an organization, individuals may tend to easily share their experience, ideas and knowledge to their tribe members than people outside their tribe since they would want their tribe to be perceived as superior over the others.

According to Okyere-Kwakye et al. (2011), individuals in a team from the same tribe would form a clique by exchanging in their own language and observing issues using their own ethnical fundamentals which would leave the other members of the group deserted. In support of this gemology, Hilder (2004) posits that tribalism controls the action and the discretion of

people within the organization. We believe that people would be motivated to share their knowledge when they perceive the recipient to be one of their kind.

Proposition 1: Tribalism has a positive significant influence on knowledge sharing

Nepotism

Nepotism is a situation where an individual benefits or enjoys certain rights or facilities due to a group attachment (Becker 1957; Fershtman et al. 2005). Analysis of this definition shows that if one is not attached to that particular group discrimination tends to surface. This supports Becker's (1957) distinctions between discrimination and nepotism by classifying nepotism as the positive aspect of discrimination. In another definition, nepotism was denoted as the act of providing an unmerited offer or position to someone in close relation (Hanekom and Thornhill 1983). Nepotism is not only practised in the organization such as promotion exercises but also in terms of awarding contracts for project execution, provision of state scholarships, and other social endeavors. Nepotism from the above definition, has a linkage with tribalism which in a way may affect knowledge sharing in the organization, in that, as individual employees share the same tribe or affiliation they may find it easy to share their technocrats or experience to favour their affiliate members. For instance, during succession planning, the protégé tends to learn faster from the mentor when they of similar affiliation such as family, church and any other social groups. They easily share their knowledge and know-how to the group member because of the trust they have for them. We feel that people may be willing to share their knowledge to other people when they are of the same fraternity.

Proposition 2: Nepotism has a positive significant influence on knowledge sharing

Cronyism

Cronyism is a form of favoritism that refers to being bias towards friends and associates. This is about providing offers to friends and colleagues who may sometimes not deserve. This concept was derived based on the axiom that "It is not what you know but who you know." Cronyism occurs within a network of insiders-the "good old boys", who confer favors on one another. As the people from the Queensland would say "old school tie". The above saying illustrates that individuals tend to favour their friends and associates during political or social endeavors. It can be deduced from this concept that cronyism may have a link with knowledge sharing, that individuals are partial to their friends and associates in providing contracts, positions and other things, so would they like to share their hard earned experience, knowledge and ideas with their friends and colleagues. We feel that individuals would be enthused to share knowledge with their cryonics.

Proposition 3: Cronyism has a positive significant influence on knowledge sharing

Openness to Diversity

Openness to diversity can be defined as the act of becoming open to accept views and perception of individual and groups with different cultural background. The ability of an individuals to tolerate the differences in other people be it culture, tribe ethnicity, age, gender and politics is known as openness to diversity.

When an individual becomes open to the culture of other people, the negative effect of diversity would are normally be stifled. Openness to diversity is said to have a relationship with knowledge sharing (Hobman et al. 2004; Michell et al., 2009). According to Haas (2006), a

majority of the current workforce are cosmopolitan and they possess experience with the mindset of belonging to the world not a particular locality. However, employees with the open mindset has a greater probability of managing or tolerating diversified environment. Cabrera et al.(2006) posit that an organization can only leverage employees to share only when its diverse employees are open to diversified. They would tend to share their experience, knowledge and insights without considering any impediment.

In this study, openness to diversity is defined as the degree to which an individual is open to share his/her knowledge to other people with different culture. Openness to diversity is selected as a construct for this study because the researcher believes that, employees' may share their knowledge to people from other tribe when they are open.

Proposition 4: Openness to diversity has a positive significant influence on knowledge sharing

PROPOSED EMPIRICAL TEST

We propose an empirical study to test the hypotheses we have suggested. A questionnaire can be used to collect the data on the following independent variables i.e., nepotism, tribalism and cronyism and dependent variable of knowledge sharing. Each item used to measure the construct will be on the 5 points likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The questionnaire consists of section A and section B. The Section A may contain questions on demography of the respondent which includes: Age, Gender, Tenure and Level of education and Position. These would be closed ended questions where a respondent only has to choose from the list of categories relevant to him or her. The questions here would be up to a total of five close-ended. Section B would consist of about 20 likert scale questions, 5 questions for each of the independent variables: nepotism, tribalism and cronyism and the dependent variable knowledge sharing. We propose a multiple regression as the statistical technique to test the relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper makes an attempt to discuss some of the social factors that can affect knowledge sharing. The paper suggests that nepotism, tribalism and cronyism have effects on individuals' knowledge sharing behavior. Several factors may affect individuals' willingness to share knowledge but as individuals are social beings and interact with each other, it is quite critical to examine the relationship between nepotism, tribalism, cronyism and knowledge sharing. An appropriate statistical testing tool would be deployed to analyze the data where an emphatic conclusion can be made.

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