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Retail Organizations Sharing Tacit Knowledge: A Critical Review

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Abstract:
In the retailing industry it has become more important to understand how the power of knowledge influences organizational capabilities and success. The various changes taking place in the workforce (i.e., employee turnover, aging and retiring workforce etc.) have posed challenges to organizations with regard to continuous learning and to the updating of employees' competencies. Further, the overall managing of one's own job requires competencies that are tacit in nature. This paper examines the importance of three variables--organizational culture, employee trust in management, and social interaction-- to the sharing of tacit knowledge in retail organizations. The paper presents a conceptual framework that advances both theory and practice concerning the impact of organizational culture and trust on tacit knowledge sharing.

Keywords: *Tacit knowledge, organizational culture and trust, knowledge transfer*

1. Introduction

In an organization, much of the knowledge individuals possess is unspoken. As employees work, they internalize information about the operations, processes, products, and services that are created and managed by the organization. If individuals are not able to share the tacit knowledge they possess what will this mean for the state of the organization? The ability of individuals to share the tacit knowledge they possess offers greater value to retail establishments.

According to Goldman (2001), the retail culture consists of concepts, norms, rules, practices, and experiences. It determines a retailer's ability to evaluate situations, identify trends and opportunities, and deal with problems. Retailing is an industry interacting directly with consumers. With rapid development of technology and intensifying competition, together with rapid changes in consumers' taste, retailers could not sustain their favorable positions in the market without a continuous fine-tuning of the organization and its processes. Furthermore, retailers could not survive in today's turbulent competitive environment without a learning orientation that includes the sharing of tacit knowledge.

The retailing environment typically incorporates all of the activities associated with procuring and reselling merchandise and services relating to personal and home surroundings. Additionally, the retail of fashion goods presents a unique challenge for managers and retailers because consumer demand for these goods constantly changes. True success in the fashion business is achieved at the retail level by consumer acceptance measured in purchases. The task of providing the merchandise and services that appeals to a retailer's consumers is a challenging proposition. Meeting this challenge requires an understanding and "know-how" that comes with experience and time, which is tacit knowledge.

The literature on knowledge sharing and learning maintains the importance of tacit knowledge sharing for increasing organizations' learning (Darr & Kurtzberg, 2000), competitive advantage (Singh & Premarajan, 2007), and innovative capabilities (Cavusgil, Calantone, & Zhao, 2003; Seidler-de Alwis & Hartmann, 2008). However, there is a need for more research from an interpersonal perspective that looks inside the employee-manager relationship as it relates to the sharing of tacit knowledge, to complement and enrich the knowledge sharing literature. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to bring to light the importance of knowledge sharing for the transfer of tacit knowledge in retail organizations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Evidence-Based Research

Tacit knowledge is used by individuals to succeed in school, work, and life and is acquired implicitly without the intention to learn or even the awareness that one has learned something (Leonard & Insch, 2005). Although, the concept of tacit knowledge is intriguing there are a number of problems that exist regarding its analysis. First, there are very few measures of tacit knowledge because by definition it is difficult to communicate and thus difficult to measure (Berman, Down, & Hill, 2002). Nevertheless, this does not mean that tacit knowledge cannot be observed; it just requires another approach. The literature makes it clear that tacit knowledge is developed through action and experience. Since little methodology is available for the measurement of such knowledge, an evidence-based approach seems logical.

A key requirement for evidence-based research is the existence of scientifically valid and readily interpretable empirical data. Thus, in the area of knowledge sharing there exists a large body of literature for analysis using this methodology. Additionally, in the substantial literature on knowledge sharing, at the strategic level of analysis, tacit knowledge is an essential component of organizational knowledge creation. Therefore, if this concept is to remain useful it should be explored in more depth, identifying those dimensions that have not been thoroughly explored, which was the goal of this paper. Furthermore, using an evidence-based research method informs organizations of the best available scientific evidence available regarding tacit knowledge sharing that can be used for making managerial decisions and developing organizational practices.

The objectives of this research are to review the knowledge sharing literature concerning the type of trust employees and managers develop in work relationships with each other, employees' willingness to share tacit knowledge with others, and the type of environment in which employees function. In order to examine these constructs an evidence-based research methodology was chosen. Rousseau and McCarthy (2007) assert that practitioners need to know evidence-based findings about workplace issues and how to effectively use evidence to meet their ongoing and daily challenges. Based on this line of thinking, this paper used an evidence-based methodology. The next section of this paper reviews empirical studies on tacit knowledge sharing.

3. Review of Empirical Studies on Tacit Knowledge Sharing

3.1. Social Interaction & Tacit Knowledge Sharing

Tacit knowledge lies below the surface of conscious thought and is accumulated through a lifetime of experience, experimentation, and learning by doing; it is experientially based (Nonaka, 1991). Retail organizations can use tacit knowledge to stay ahead of their competitors by gaining the knowledge, maintaining it, and using it effectively. If retailers use tacit knowledge effectively, they will gain a competitive advantage (Boisot, 1998). With tacit knowledge, organizations can possess unique capabilities that are often invisible to competitors and thus hard to replicate. When employees' experiences and skills are internalized into tacit knowledge in the form of technical "know-how", they become valuable assets. Tacit knowledge is very broad in its scope; it can be used in various areas of an organization, not just for one function. However, because tacit knowledge is not available in any explicit form it is difficult to quickly spread or share it within an organization. This is what presents a problem for retail organizations.

The sharing of tacit knowledge requires involvement and to transfer it, experiences must be shared through actions (Stenmark, 2001). The more employees work together, the more time they spend socializing and casually talking about their experiences and impressions of each other's experiences, the more tacit knowledge they will share (Lubit, 2001). Another way to spread tacit knowledge is to develop routines for dealing with situations and spreading the routines throughout the organization. Routines capture the tacit knowledge of those who develop them and spread the effect of their expertise and judgment. Additionally, as individuals work they learn informally through listening to others, making mistakes, talking about what they have done, and paying attention to daily work activities. Marsick and Watkins (1990) posited that informal learning is not typically highly structured; instead, the learning is experience-based, non-routine, and often tacit. What individuals learn informally can be used to move ideas through organizations and help others generate new knowledge. Although the tacit knowledge of each employee is personal and unique, others can absorb much of the wisdom embodied within each individual through social interactions (Stenmark, 2001).

3.2. Organizational Culture & Tacit Knowledge

The topic of organizational culture warrants attention when discussing tacit knowledge sharing because it affects employees' attitudes and governs their behaviors toward sharing knowledge with others. The effectiveness of organizational knowledge transfer is influenced by key organizational factors such as the people who make up the organization and the culture that evolves from the interactions of the people (Lehaney, Clarke, Coakes, and Jack, 2004).

Organizational values and beliefs that influence knowledge sharing include the creation of a sense of involvement and contribution among employees, the types of knowledge that are valued, and knowledge related values such as trust and openness. Further, culture also shapes the perceptions and behaviors of employees and one way this occurs is through establishing the context for social interactions within the organization (De Long & Fahey, 2000). In the daily activities of organizations, signs of tacit knowledge can be detected through individuals' intuitions, feelings, insights and personal abilities. Augier and Vendelo (1999) stated that if an organization is to benefit from the tacit knowledge it possesses, it needs to orientate its routines, structures, and culture to provide a social environment in which to exchange knowledge and disseminate it across the organization. Furthermore, as people work and integrate within organizations, organizational components can facilitate the spread of tacit knowledge from person to person. Thus, the extent to which a firm's organizational culture is prepared to share tacit knowledge will determine how effective it is at motivating employees to interact for knowledge sharing. Thus, the following propositions are posited:
- Proposition 1: The culture of an organization will influence its ability to share tacit knowledge.
- Proposition 2: Organizations that encourage social interactions will aid employees' willingness to share tacit knowledge within the organization.

3.3. Trust in Management & Tacit Knowledge Sharing

Building authentic trust is a key requirement in developing adaptive organizations. It is an important human skill cultivated overtime that must be an ongoing process to produce results. Whether retail managers gain access to the knowledge and creative thinking they need to solve problems, depends largely on how much people trust them (Lines, Selart, Espedal, and Johansen, 2005). The presence of a high degree of trust helps an organization enhance its cohesiveness and improve its capacity to learn and adapt. Therefore, retail managers should place the greatest possible emphasis on building quality relationships and sustaining trust.

Trust leads to increased overall knowledge exchange, makes knowledge exchanges less costly, and increases the likelihood that knowledge acquired from a employees is sufficiently understood and absorbed in a way that a person can put it to use (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003). According to Tsui, Pearce, Porter, and Tripoli (1997) in a social exchange relationship, the inducements an employer offers go beyond short-term monetary rewards. They include an extended consideration of an employee's career within the firm. In turn, employees' obligations and contributions include working on job assignments that fall outside of prior agreements or expertise, assisting new employees, and in general being willing to consider the organization's interests as important as their core job duties. The employee is also willing to learn firm-specific skills that are not readily transferable to other employees (i.e., tacit knowledge) because he or she trusts that such investments will be reciprocated over the long term (Tsui et al. 1997).

Lawler's (2001) Affect Theory of Social Exchange examined how individuals experience, interpret and respond to their own emotions and feelings produced by successful or unsuccessful exchange efforts. This theory connects the task of exchange with a social unit, focusing particularly on the joint activity entailed in social exchange and to the emotional responses to success or failure of the joint activity (2001, p. 347). The relationships that form between employees and managers are dynamic and can be explained using Lawler's (2001) theory which posits, in a social exchange one individual voluntarily provides a benefit to another (i.e., managers and employees sharing tacit knowledge), invoking an obligation of the other party to reciprocate by providing some benefit in return (i.e., employees and managers using their knowledge to help each other).

Trust has long been considered fundamental to cooperative relationships. According to Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) trust involves estimations about whether the individual being trusted will do something beneficial or detrimental before the individual engaged in trusting can really know for sure. When employees perceive that management supports their behavior and needs, it creates trust in that there is a belief that the organization will fulfill its obligations. One reason knowledge fails to be shared on the job is the lack of trust between organizational leaders and their employees (Peterson and Hicks, 1996). While trust in management is based on an attribution that a leader is honest and non-exploitative, this paper asserts that management's trust in employees is assessed in this same way. Therefore, leaders and employees should cultivate trust with one another. When trust is established in the workplace all individuals will feel comfortable sharing and applying new knowledge on the job. The literature discussed in this paper has shown that trust in management has a significant influence on many organizational variables (i.e., culture, employee-manager relations).

Based on the literature presented here it seems that trust is a critical factor in the process of sharing tacit knowledge in an organization. As a social construct, trust is in the center of relationships influencing the employee's behavior toward management and management's behavior towards employees. In the retail environment, managers are extremely important because they are ultimately responsible for the performance of their staff and the departments they manage. If tacit knowledge is to be used to help the company succeed, managers must be able to ensure its development, preservation, and renewal. The literature presents the conclusion that managers should attempt to develop technical, conceptual, and trust-building skills. In addition, employees need to exhibit cooperation, trust, and interpersonal skills during social interactions to facilitate knowledge sharing in the workplace. Thus, it is proposed that:

- Proposition 3: Organizations that encourage a high level of trust among employees and managers will promote the sharing of tacit knowledge.

In summary, the knowledge sharing, trust, and tacit knowledge literature provide a strong foundation for the development of a conceptual framework for the sharing of tacit knowledge in retail organizations. The literature presented in this section offers a thorough review of trust in management, the mechanisms by which trust and culture influences the sharing of tacit knowledge, and the importance of social interaction to knowledge sharing. The conceptual framework presented in the next section will incorporate several of the factors identified here.

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework places importance on concepts, which encourage the sharing of tacit knowledge within retail organizations. The framework depicted in Figure 1 integrates the key factors discussed in this paper that can lead retail organizations to greater tacit knowledge acquisition. The factors presented are not the only issues that need to be considered but this paper presents them as the most critical elements that may influence the effective sharing of tacit knowledge. This paper proposes that an organizational culture that is conducive to knowledge sharing through the creation of a work environment that encourages social interaction and trust will have a higher propensity for employees to share tacit knowledge. Additionally, the framework proposes that employees who trust management will have a higher propensity to share the tacit knowledge they possess with others in the organization. The overall notions developed in this paper are

supported by conceptual and empirical knowledge sharing literature and related disciplines. The linkages between trust, organizational culture, and tacit knowledge have been validated through an extensive review of literature.
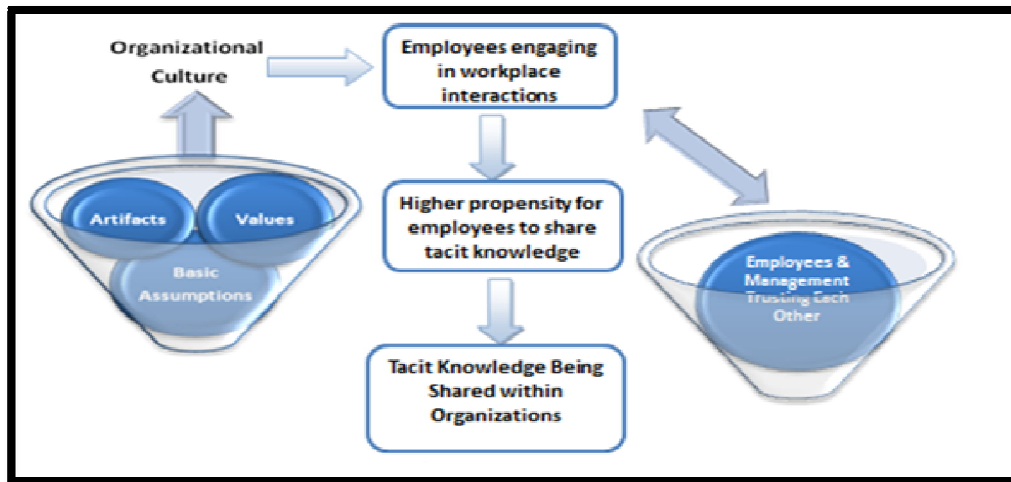

Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Tacit Knowledge Sharing within Retail Organizations

This framework makes a unique contribution to current understandings of tacit knowledge sharing by considering the organization-individual influence, personal influence, interpersonal influence, and the interactions of them all. The novel approach used in this framework advances both theory and practice concerning the impact of organizational culture and trust on tacit knowledge sharing.

5. Summary of Findings

Based on the literature review and conceptual framework, this section discusses the findings by summarizing the linkages between constructs (i.e. organizational culture, trust in management, and social interaction) that emerged from the literature as critical factors to tacit knowledge sharing in organizations. Individuals acquire knowledge informally and at times unconsciously. Further, they can learn much incidentally by observing their co-workers and managers, and through the vicarious experiences of others (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, this tacit knowledge sharing can occur in the absence of deliberate intention to learn and this process can be aided or hindered by organizational leaders. This paper argues that organizational and managerial influences in the work environment will determine how employees interact with one another to share tacit knowledge. During the process of social interaction there must exist some level of trust between the individuals exchanging the knowledge as well as an organizational atmosphere that is conducive to unstructured employee interaction.

Based on the review of literature, this paper presumes that tacit knowledge is captured by an organization when an environment exists where vicarious learning and a culture of sharing is present. Nonaka's (1991) framework of knowledge creation presented socialization as a means to share tacit knowledge. According to Kelloway and Barling (2000) the benefits of a social interaction culture, in regards to knowledge sharing include employees who are more knowledgeable about their colleagues' potential for being knowledge sources as well as employees who trust more colleagues, and are willing to share knowledge with them as a result. In addition, the shared experiences that occur through the interactions of employees will also improve the possibility for tacit knowledge to be shared. Additionally, Yang and Farn (2009) suggested that an individual could acquire tacit knowledge and personal experience only in a tacit-oriented manner that emphasizes social interaction. Thus, social relationships that are developed in the workplace may be the most important factor that facilitates tacit knowledge sharing among employees within an organization. Thus, the literature presented here suggests that Proposition 1 which states, the culture of an organization will influence its ability to share tacit knowledge and Proposition 2 which states, organizations that encourage social interactions will aid employees' willingness to share tacit knowledge within the organization, have been supported because the predictions made in Propositions 1 and 2 are based on existing theory (Bandura, 1986,; Lawler, 2001) and supported by previous research (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006; von Krogh, 1998; DeLong & Fahey; Singh & Premarajan, 2007; Al-Alawi, Al-Marzooqi, & Mohammed, 2007).

The greater the level of trust, the greater the level of accessibility and the better the opportunities for tacit knowledge sharing (McAllister, 1995; Holste and Fields 2005; Ng & Chua, 2006; Hansen, Morrow, & Batista, 2002). Trust builds incrementally and accumulates exhibiting an indirect effect on the accessibility and efficient transfer of tacit knowledge. Trust depends upon sincerity in the sense that employees and managers are what they claim to be. Additionally, trust is based on one's expectations of another and is therefore formed in the conscious mind. The process of tacit knowledge sharing requires that individuals engage in close interactions that allow them to observe and emulate each other. Thus, Janowicz-Panjaitan and Noorderhaven (2009) posits that close and intense interaction between individuals in organizations is an effective mechanism for transferring tacit knowledge. Therefore, the extent to which the sharing of tacit knowledge is possible is determined by the

systems and structures of the collaboration. Following this line of thinking, the literature suggests that systems and structures (i.e., culture) within organizations determine the possible flow of tacit knowledge. In sum, the literature provided an abundance of work supporting proposition 3 which states, organizations that encourage a high level of trust among employees and managers will promote the sharing of tacit knowledge.

6. Managerial Implications of the Findings

The analysis discussed in this paper offers several practical implications for retail managers. However, before management can implement any changes, they must be supported by the organization. To assist management, organizations can provide pleasant, stimulating work environments to create, gather, and share tacit knowledge. It is important for organizations to have onsite locations where employees can connect with co-workers and managers. Therefore, the implementation of communities of practice that informally bind together employees who share expertise within organizations can be used to begin the process of sharing tacit knowledge.

In addition, managers must take extra measures to develop and maintain trusting relationships where lines of communication are open and being used to share tacit knowledge. An example, of a strategy that can be employed is "wikis," a web-based software tool that employees can use to post information (i.e., tacit knowledge) and other employees who view the tool can add knowledge to the database. This tool allows employees to disseminate knowledge as well as expand their knowledge base through a collaborative effort. These network connections are meant to bring employees together to enable them to share tacit knowledge.

There are also other tacit knowledge sharing methods that can be employed such as mentoring programs and informal meetings. Organizations can use mentoring programs to offer more individualized knowledge sharing connections between employees. Mentoring programs may also allow managers and employees to directly transmit their experiences one-on-one. The informal meetings that could take place in organizations would be loosely structured where ideas and issues could be discussed across all levels of the organization. This meeting format would promote collaborative knowledge sharing and encourage all employees to become part of the organization helping to build it and benefit from its success. When both managers and employees make an investment to develop lasting relationships with one another, the organization may find that the knowledge sharing process is enhanced which can in turn promote positive organizational performance despite various resource and contextual constraints that may be present in the external environment.

7. Conclusion

By applying the strategies discussed in this paper-- i.e., promoting employee interactions in trusting relationships where tacit knowledge can be freely shared-- organizations may gain a competitive advantage because the tacit knowledge shared within the firm will be very difficult for other firms to copy (Boisot, 1998). The globalization of the retail business and the rate of technological advancement encourage a highly competitive market with demands for continual product and service improvements. Embedding tacit knowledge into the organizational setting serves a number of significant purposes for retail establishments. In a changing and volatile environment, employees who have deep knowledge and wide experience related to an area of focus are able to quickly respond to a variety of emerging challenges (Bennet & Bennet, 2008). Thus, sharing and integrating tacit knowledge brings together different pieces of knowledge that together can enable the development of new and improved products and services which can aid retailers in maintaining success.

Future research may be conducted with the limitations of this study in mind. As this study employed an evidence based research methodology, the outcomes of the propositions presented can only be inferred. Therefore, future research could establish the generalizability of the findings of this paper by conducting a study with a longitudinal design to enhance the understanding of the dynamics of tacit knowledge sharing among employees. This paper provided a compelling theoretical framework for conducting an empirical study for this line of research. However, the empirical foundations of the assertions made in this paper are limited to a few studies (Mishra & Morrissey, 1990; Gardner et al., 2005; and Spreitzer & Mishra, 1999) and work that is more empirical is needed. Identifying when and how tacit knowledge is being transferred within an organization needs additional validation. Additional future research areas could be focused on exploring the effect of employee-manager relationships on organizational performance.

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