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Impact of Employee Empowerment on Knowledge Sharing: A Case Study of Bangladesh Mobile Telecommunication Service Provider

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ABSTRACT

Highly competitive business environment turns the high quality employee as precious asset into the key of business success as well as the competitive advantage source. Well knowledge sharing behavior among employees can enhance service quality and delivery process value. This paper analyzes how internal management system can reinforce knowledge sharing among employees, facilitating knowledge sharing behavior. We focused on the employees of mobile telecommunication service provider of Bangladesh to explore the relationships between empowerment and knowledge sharing behavior of employee. In this regard, we established a model identifying different empowerment dimensions. After then, we performed exploratory factor analysis with principal component to extract different factors for each dimension. At last, we conducted regression analysis to identify the impact of different empowerment dimensions on knowledge sharing. From the research, it is evident that employees need to have significant authority in performing their job and taking some strategic decisions that will affect their respective job. Moreover, employees should adopt and apply scientific approach in performing their job. Apart from these, employees need to have accessibility to knowledge repository in the organization they have to be extrovert and responsible in sharing knowledge.

Keywords: Employee Empowerment, Knowledge Sharing

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive era, knowledge is considered as one of the important assets of the organization. This asset needs to be valued, developed, and managed (Bogdanowicz & Bailey, 2002) by the organizations in order to get competitive advantage in the market place. Organizational capacity to learn and use the knowledge more effectively is viewed as a source of core competency (Hsu, 2008; Lim & Chan, 2004; Senge, 2003) that gives the competitive advantage to the organization. Knowledge gives power to employee, enhance their skill, and give them confidence on doing their job properly. Employees and the organization always seek for new knowledge for improved performance. Without this organizations will lose dynamism thereby the competitiveness.

Although there is no obligation to share knowledge (Ipe, 2003), knowledge sharing is a characteristic of a person which is voluntary that implies a conscious act by an individual who participates in the knowledge exchange process (Davenport, 1997). Bartol and Srivastava (2002) defined knowledge sharing is a process where individuals within the organization share organizationally relevant information, ideas, suggestions, and expertise with one another. Reuse and regeneration of knowledge at individual and organizational level ensure effective knowledge sharing practices in the organization (Siakas & Georgiadou, 2006). Knowledge sharing within organization imparts critical and creative thinking in the individual that ultimately produce new knowledge which is beneficial for the company (Lindsey, 2006). Organizations involved in active and systematic organizational learning and knowledge sharing can improve its performance significantly compared to its competitors.

However, Knowledge sharing is not a natural tendency as people are not willing to acquire and share knowledge with others (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2006). This kind of behavior is found to be very difficult to change because employees scared of the loss of valuable knowledge. The limitation of time factor, the low appreciation to the knowledge contributor and some other factors contribute to this phenomenon (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2006). Therefore, organizations need to understand which factors enable conducive environment for effective knowledge sharing in the organization (Aulawi, Sudirman, Suryadi, & Govindaraju, 2009).

Importance of employee empowerment in sharing knowledge is highlighted in the literature (Davenport, 1997; Ryan & Prybutok, 2001; Moffett et al., 2003; Cristina, 2009). Knowledge sharing success lies on empowering employee to effective level (Verespej, 1999). Through empowerment, employers can value their employees' expertise and help them communicate their knowledge by creating ways to capture, organize and share knowledge (Martinez, 1998). Empowered employees are given autonomy–the freedom, independence and discretion–over their work activities. They are assigned work that has high levels of task significance– important to themselves and others. Empowered employees also have control over performance feedback that guides their work and also a feeling of self-efficacy; that is, they believe that they are capable of successfully completing the task. Employee need to have feeling of ownership on their work otherwise they will not share knowledge in the organization (Cristina, 2009). Cheah, Ooi, Teh, Chong, and Yong (2009) in their study concluded that TQM practices that encompass empowerment can foster knowledge sharing in the organization. In this regard, authors have emphasized on conducting research in context. Hariharan (2005) mentioned that each individual employee needs to be empowered to leverage the collective knowledge of the entire organization in serving customers. Thus, it can be concluded that empowerment is recognized as one of the critical implementation factors to the success of knowledge sharing.

The objective of this study is to identify the effect of empowerment on knowledge sharing behavior of the employee in the Telecommunication industry of Bangladesh. Telecommunication service by its inherent nature requires certain level of autonomy for the employee to provide better customer service. Hence, employees need to be empowered to exercise their skill and knowledge to meet the individual customer's expectation. Therefore, it is necessary that employees understand their customer as well as their job properly. To generate better understanding, employees need to share knowledge within the organization. In this context, this paper aims at investigating level employee empowerment that enables knowledge sharing in the telecommunication service provider organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are ample of researches that explain role of human and organizational contexts in knowledge sharing. Most of those researches use knowledge enablers as a mechanism (Lin, 2007; Lee & Choi, 2003) for knowledge sharing. These knowledge enablers are based on socio-technical theory (Pan & Scarbrough, 1998) that explains organization support from social and technical perspective. Social perspective entails human characteristics such as attitude, skills and values, relationship among people and the structure of organization. While technical perspective encompasses importance of technology for converting input to output.

In light of socio-technical theory Siakas and Georgiadou (2006) identified factors that affect knowledge sharing as hard and soft. Hard factors are tools and technologies whereas softs are intra-organizational relationship among individuals and teams, motivation, and organizational environment. Alam, Abdullah, Ishak, and Jain (2009) shows that reward system, culture, trust and technology are the four key factors which influence the knowledge sharing behavior in the firms. Aulawi, Sudirman, Suryadi, and Govindaraju (2009) identified teamwork, trust, senior management support and self-efficacy as knowledge enablers that positively affect knowledge sharing behavior of employees. Ngah and Hoo (2009) and Bock et al. (2005) explore trust as an influencing factor for knowledge sharing. Reward is also found to be positively associated with knowledge sharing behavior of the employee. People are intended to share knowledge when there is some monetary return (Kugel & Schostek, 2004). At such instance extrinsic reward is found to be affect significantly in knowledge sharing behavior (Bock et al., 2005; Kim & Lee, 2006).

Web-specific self-efficacy and social network ties are shown to be good predictors of knowledge sharing intention which, in turn, is significantly associated with knowledge sharing behavior (Chen, Chen, & Kingshuk, 2009).

Degree of altruism and the team climate of participative safety also have significant and positive impact on knowledge sharing behavior (Feng-Chuan, Chang, & Cheng). Learning is not only the enabler of knowledge sharing but also feedback on learning and access to learning resources have significant and strong effect on knowledge sharing (Abdullah, Hassim, & Chik, 2009). Their study provides strong support for the synergistic use of internally coherent set of practices built with feedback on learning behavior and access to learning.

Employee empowerment can be achieved through involving them in their own job design and evaluation of their own jobs (Chong & Choi, 2005). By doing this, the employees become more committed towards using their knowledge for the general good of the organization. Further, organizations must realize that when employees are empowered, they begin to think of the best ways of delivering best results in their jobs. This is especially true in today's business environment where customer becomes the central focus. Many teams are now working directly with their customers to design products for them. If the teams are not empowered, they would have to seek for their superior's approval before they could inform their customers. In such a case, time and resources are wasted.

DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH MODEL & HYPOTHESIS

The conceptual model developed in this paper use the empowerment dimension mentioned by Karakoc and Yilmaz (2009). The authors mentioned that empowerment from top to bottom means giving power to employee in four dimensions: *authority, specialization, resource,* and *personality.* The conceptual model examines these dimensions that would possibly affect the knowledge sharing in the organization. This model is presented in figure I.

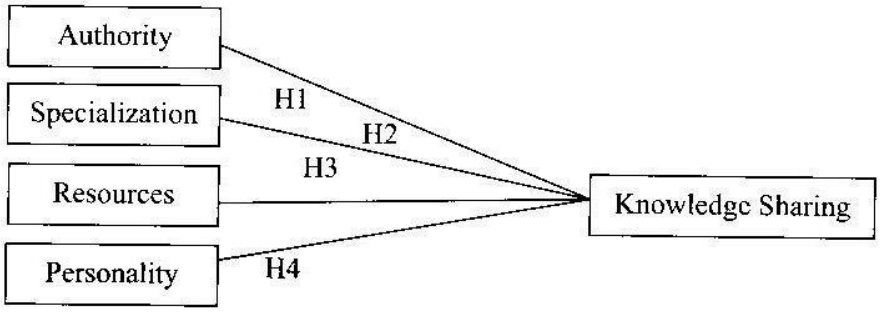


Figure I - A Schematic Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Authority

Foss, Husted and Michailova (2009) argued on having impact of delegating authority to the employee on knowledge sharing. Employees have to get some decision making authority if they feel to be empowered. Centralized structure of organization can be a barrier for creating a knowledge sharing community in the

organization (Kim & Leee, 2006). Delegation of wider responsibility to employees and informal and personal organization coordination promote more horizontal and open communication among employees, and will draw more effort from employees on providing information and suggestion (Sabri, 2005). Centralized organizational structure seems to have negative influence on knowledge sharing behavior of employees as centralization creates a partial structure unsupportive of generating individual innovative thinking and state of autonomy (Castells, 2000).

Tsai (2002) has found an inverse relationship between level of centralization and employees' participation in decision making. Thus, centralization can be a barrier for employees' initiative to exchange knowledge among units in organization and level of needs of knowledge sharing will be low. Aulawi, Sudirman, Suryadi, and Govindaraju (2009) also found that the higher the level of centralization, the lower the positive attitude towards knowledge sharing.

Chong (2005) in his study has found that even with limited authority employees are not active in sharing knowledge because they found this kind of authority as a waste of time and resource as they are not allowed to make meaningful decisions on behalf of their organizations and customers. Thus, Authority leads to formulation of first hypothesis as follows,

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between Authority and knowledge sharing.

Specialization or Skill

It is not possible by the employee to perform their jobs effectively without the appropriate knowledge and skills (Lawler, 1992). If employees have the appropriate knowledge and skill that enable them to understand their jobs, they will have contribution for improved performance of the organization and employee will feel empowered (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). This is because when individuals are empowered, they begin to take extra responsibilities to solve organizational problems by learning new skills in their jobs (Anahotu, 1998), which will eventually lead to them being more competent. Training and Development plays an important role in transferring knowledge; spreading the

knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization (Dessler, Griffiths, & Lloyd-Walker, 2005). The training investments are essential because it incorporates skills and abilities inside the employee to make important workplace decisions properly (Konrad, 2006).

Cheah, Ooi, Teh, Chong, and Yong (2009) mention that use of TQM tools can enhance the knowledge and skill of the employee in the organization. Mohanta, Kannan, and Thooyamani (2006) has emphasized on empowering the knowledge worker with internet learning for knowledge sharing. On-the-Job training such as peer assist, training and mentoring, challenging projects, job description, job rotation, cross training, and sharing sessions as enabler of knowledge sharing that can enhance individual performance of employees (Pearlasamy & Mansor, 2008). Therefore, the second hypothesis is,

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between Specialization and knowledge sharing.

Resources

For effective knowledge sharing the management should make the resources available to the employee. These resources are tools and technologies that employees can use in knowledge sharing. Employees can share knowledge internally as well as with geographically dispersed external organizations through technology (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003). In light of that, Ruggles (1998) emphasized on creating or acquiring a database or knowledge repository by the organization to store the expertise of every employee so that others can have access to it. Tobin (1997) states that if employees do not have the access to knowledge database then it does not add value to the organization. Doctor and Ramachandran (2007) focus on need of an Institutional Repository and implementation using Open Source Digital Repository software, DSpace to enable knowledge sharing. Mason, Castleman, Parker (2008) have found that the intensity of use of the web by employee are essential in shaping knowledge sharing behavior and preferences. Garcia and Ayres (2010) also emphasized on using web-specific technology for effective knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing technology may provide a visible symbol of management's support for the

knowledge sharing (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003). Therefore, management must also provide access to the technology to employees for enabling learning to take place (Abdullah, Hassim, & Chik, 2009). Hence, we can establish the next hypotheses,

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between Resources and knowledge sharing.

Personality

Employees in an organization come from different cultural, social, educational background. So, their personality characteristics greatly affect the knowledge sharing process in the organization. Normally a person does not share knowledge unless he/she feels it is useful and important to him/her (Ryu, Hee, & Han, 2003). Cabrera et al. (2006) employ a five factor model of personality (FFM) to examine people's behavior in knowledge sharing and reported that three dimensions of the five personality characteristics agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience are related to knowledge sharing behavior:. Based on same five factor model, Bindu (2008) has concluded that conscientiousness and agreeableness has positive association with knowledge sharing. While, other factors openness, neuroticism, and extraversion seem to have no influence on individual's knowledge sharing behavior. Fang and Liu have found that agreeableness, openness, extraversion and conscientiousness, have significantly positive link to willingness and behavior of knowledge sharing. Whereas, Neuroticism negatively affects on behavior of knowledge sharing. Hsu, Wu, and Yeh (2007) did the similar where higher aggregative levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, or extroversion for a team can resulted in higher levels of knowledge sharing. However, emotional stability did not have influence in knowledge sharing. The last hypothesis is therefore,

Hypothesis 4: There is a significant relationship between Personality and knowledge sharing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey instrument was formulated to obtain feedback from the employees of telecommunication service provider in Bangladesh, assessing their knowledge sharing behavior. The surveys sent out were personally addressed to the owner and or manager of each of the organizations and requesting them to distribute the questionnaires to their employees.

The population of this study comprises all mobile telecom service providers in Bangladesh registered under Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Company (BTRC). Data were gathered based on personally administered questionnaire. The respondents for this study were targeted to be employees who are in the mid level to lower level positions and those who are working in the organizations for more than three years. It is assumed that those who are working in the organization for more than two years are already familiar with the culture of the organizations (Alam, Abdullah, Ishak, & Jain, 2009).

A pack of 40 questionnaires were sent to managers of each company. Altogether 240 questionnaires were sent to the organizations. Out of the total questionnaire 116 were returned with a response rate of 48.33%. After screening the returned questionnaire it was found that 56 respondents are working in the respective organizations for more than 3 years. Thus, responses of these people were considered for analysis purpose. The analysis was performed using statistical software SPSS.

The questionnaire was designed using the literatures on knowledge sharing behavior (Scarbrough & Carter, 2000; Hislop, 2002; Kugel & Schostek, 2004; Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Liliana, Kedia, Datta, & Rasheed, 2008). The first part of the questionnaire included questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as gender, age, working experience, and educational level. The second part consisted of questions measuring the four empowerment dimensions influencing knowledge sharing behavior on a Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The empowerment dimensions were established based on the existing literatures on empowerment (Hsu, Wu, & Yeh, 2007; Pearlasamy & Mansor, 2008; Konrad, 2006; Spreitzer, 1995; Voisard, 2008; Kumar, 2009; Mazdarani & Chigozirim, 2008).

Exploratory factor analysis with Principal Component was performed to determine different factors along the dimensions of empowerment. After then regression analysis was carried out to establish the relationship between knowledge sharing and empowerment.

The reliability was reported by Cronbach's alpha (George & Mallery, 2003) for scale reliability obtained for our sample. Reliability from our sample showed a reasonable level of reliability ($\alpha > 0.74$).

RESULT

Table I presents a breakdown of the respondents' demographic situation. The majority of the respondents were male (67.9 %), more than half of the respondents were thirty to forty years old (51.8%), most of them have total working experience from three to six years (58.9%) and the second highest group is represented six to nine years (16.1%). Majority of the respondents were Master degree holder (76.8).

Table I: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Demographic Variable		No. of Respondents	%
Gender			
	Male	38	67.9
	Female	18	32.1
Age			
	Below 30	18	32.1
	30-40	29	51.8
	40-50	8	14.3
	50-60	1	1.8
	Above 60	0	0
Total Years of Work Experience			
	3-6	33	58.9
	6-9	9	16.1
	9-12	8	14.3
	More than 12	6	10.7

Highest Degree Obtained		
Bachelor	13	23.2
Masters	43	76.8
Doctoral	0	0
Post Doc	0	0

Result of factor analysis for empowerment dimensions is presented in table II to V for knowledge & skill, authority, resources, and personality respectively. Factor analysis reveals two factors for each of the three dimensions knowledge and skill, authority, resources, and three factors for personality.

For Knowledge & Skill dimension factors derived are Knowledge Supply (factor1) and Scientific Application (factor 2). Knowledge Supply is the sources from which an employee has opportunity to gain knowledge. While, Scientific Application means following scientific approach on using the knowledge. Total variance explained along knowledge & skill dimension is 71.75%.

Table II: Result of Factor Analysis of Extent of Use of Knowledge and Skill in the Organization

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
I deal with fact whenever I take any decision		.848
I always perform strategic analysis whenever I make any decision		.755
I always use scientific approach for decision making		.733
I am provided with training whenever needed	.910	
I am involved in multiple tasks apart from my specialized one	.920	
My superiors share their knowledge and experience with me	.863	

Authority dimension reveals two factors namely Decisive Authority (factor1) and Job Authority (factor 2) with 58.27% variance explained. Decisive Authority is the authority of the employee to take strategic decision and Job Authority is the authority of the employee to perform the job by own and take job related decisions.

Table III: Result of Factor Analysis of Authority Allocated in the Job

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job		.728
I am involved in making decisions that affect my work		.728
As I gain expertise I am allowed more latitude on the job		.654
I am allowed to make decisions necessary for effectively accomplishing my routine day-to-day duties and responsibilities	.831	
I am allowed to make decisions when resolving non-routine situations or issues	.53	
I have been invited to participate in teams or committees that influence decisions for my department or the company as a whole	.848	

Convenience (factor 1) and Availability (factor 2) are the two factors obtained for Resource dimension. The factor analysis explained 72.54% of the variance. Convenience is the factor which implies that an employee has access to any repository inside the organization to gain knowledge. Availability is the factor which means existence of a knowledge repository in the organization.

Table IV: Result of Factor Analysis of Resources Got for Completing the Job

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
I have access to the database for information I need to make good decisions	.908	
I use information technology for decision making	.898	
There is a database or repository where required information for decision making are available		.781
The database is updated regularly		.787

Along the Personality dimension, Emotional Stability (factor 1), Extraversion (factor 2), and Conscientiousness (factor 3) are found to be significant personality characteristics prevailing among the employees. Whereas, agreeableness and openness are found to be absent. Total variance explained for this dimension is 58.37%.

Table V: Result of Factor Analysis of Regarding Personality Characteristics

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
I am seldom sad or depressed	.712		
I rarely feel lonely	.730		
I rarely feel fearful or anxious	.637		
I often feel as if I'm bursting with energy			.657
I am a cheerful, high-spirited person			.703
I really enjoy talking to people			.619
I am a productive person who always gets the job done		.684	
I strive for excellence in everything I do		.723	
I try to perform all the tasks assigned to me conscientiously		.751	

Table VI presents the regression result using knowledge sharing as a dependent variable and empowerment dimensions as independent variable. The regression result (adjusted R2 value .279) shows a significant relationship between Knowledge & Skill and Authority with knowledge sharing. These two dimensions of empowerment are found to be significant predictors of knowledge sharing behavior of the employees in the mobile telecommunication service providers.

Table VI: Regression Result

Empowerment Dimensions	b	t	p
Knowledge Supply	.385	2.876	.006*
Scientific Application	.347	2.369	.022**
Decisive Authority	.413	3.443	.001*
Job Authority	.278	2.084	.043**
Convenience	.238	1.843	.032**
Availability	.003	-.025	.980
Emotional Stability	.100	-.833	.409
Extroversion	.313	-2.133	.038**
Conscientiousness	.217	1.551	.028**

**Significant at 1% level*
*** Significant at 5% level*

Convenience along Resources dimension is found to be significant predictor for knowledge sharing. While, Availability does not reveal any significant relationship for Resources dimension.

Extroversion & Conscientiousness Personality characteristics are found to be significant predictor of knowledge sharing. These three factors influence employees to great extent in sharing knowledge in the organization. Whereas, Emotional Stability has no relation with the knowledge sharing behavior of the employee.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals a set of empowerment conditions that are necessary in the organization for knowledge sharing among the employees. These conditions are evaluated against certain parameters that have influence on knowledge sharing behavior of the employees inside the organization. From the research, it is evident that employees need to have an ample of sources that will supply knowledge to them. Training, multi tasking, and inherited knowledge from superior are included within this category. Apart from this, employees need to follow scientific approach and should have substantial opportunity to apply that knowledge in their respective job.

The research also substantiates the fact that employees should have significant authority on how they will perform their task and take decision related to their job. Moreover, employee should also have authority to take any strategic decision that will affect their job.

Employees should have access, whenever needed, to any knowledge repository inside the organization.

This research also reveals that for effective knowledge sharing it is necessary that employees be sociable, enthusiastic, energetic, and optimistic (Extroversion); responsible, dependable, persistent and organized (Conscientious).

At the end, it can be concluded from the research that Authority of employees and use of their knowledge & Skill are necessary for effective knowledge sharing inside the organization. Apart from that, employees need to have accessibility to knowledge repository in the organization. Last but not least, employees have to be extrovert and responsible in sharing knowledge.

FUTURE RESEARCH SCOPE

Alike other researches. This research is also not without limitation. The research is conducted only with one kind of setting that is within a single industry. The organizational practices, strategies, competitive priorities are more or less same for all of the organizations. Thus, to get a better picture it is necessary to perform this study in other industry.

The empowerment dimensions used in this research are not the exhaustive. So, future research can be initiated using some other dimensions of empowerment.

Moreover, future research can be initiated comparing among different types of empowerment to identify the role of these empowerment in sharing knowledge thus a set of empowerment conditions will be available to establish best practices on knowledge sharing.

At last, a longitudinal study over certain time period inside the organization can be performed to identify the effect of empowerment on knowledge sharing.

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