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The Key Knowledge Workers in the Process of Sharing Knowledge: Motives and Conditions

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to identify motives and conditions acting as incentives for key knowledge workers to share their individual knowledge with other employees.

Methodology: The interviews with key knowledge workers of 50 companies operating in Poland were employed as the main data collection method. In the process of analysis, the interview findings were compared with the results of the questionnaire survey conducted among entrepreneurs and managers representing the companies of the interviewed key knowledge workers.

Findings: The motives of knowledge sharing by key knowledge workers are as follows: financial motivation, sense of responsibility for the results of the organization and the results of teamwork, building and consolidating professional authority. The following conditions are required to be established to support knowledge sharing by key knowledge workers: organic leadership, organization of team work, communication processes, HR processes.

Practical implications: Achieving high results in knowledge sharing with the participation of key knowledge workers requires a comprehensive knowledge management system. The knowledge-oriented enterprises have to create the adequate working environment for the key knowledge workers. The comfort zone for such employees guarantees that they become aware investors of their own intellectual capital. Their engagement

in the knowledge sharing process is the key issue in regard to achieving the long-term, sustainable competitive advantage.

Originality/value: The originality of the study derives from the fact that the issue of motives and conditions for key knowledge workers to share their knowledge has not been much studied, especially in the context of the companies operating in Poland. Comparing and contrasting the opinions of the interviewed key knowledge workers with the point of view represented by the entrepreneurs and managers of their companies provides additional value.

Paper type: Research paper.

Keywords: key knowledge workers, knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing motives, knowledge sharing conditions.

1. Introduction

A significant problem and challenge of its effective stimulation, support and application is the diffusion of knowledge, frequently identified with sharing knowledge within contemporary companies. It is particularly important to gain knowledge from the best valued employees with core competences. Their knowledge is a perfect basis on which knowledge of other individual employees and then the company organizational knowledge can be built. Processes of sharing knowledge serve for this purpose (Jashapara, 2004).

At the same time, despite great interest in the issue of knowledge sharing, few publications (in Poland and worldwide) focus on various aspects of the key employees' participation in these processes, which are important (crucial) for the functioning and development of an organization (Pietruszka-Ortyl, 2011). The review of Polish and foreign literature indicates that there is an extensive research gap in the study of motives, conditions and methods of the key employees' participation in knowledge sharing processes (Wiig et al., 1997, pp. 15–27). The absence of comprehensive studies and thus the resulting publications is noticeable. Even the best system of knowledge recording and maintaining will turn out helpless in the face of the complexity referring to various aspects of tacit knowledge held by the best employees. Therefore, the importance of appropriate motivation for cooperation, regarding the employees presenting unique knowledge is increasing. Key personnel of an organization frequently have no reasons to be generous and share their knowledge with colleagues. In addition,

in traditional organizations older key employees often treat their knowledge as an indicator of a unique position in the organizational hierarchy of the company. Knowledge is equated with power, advantage and access to corporate resources (Alawi et al., 2007, pp. 22–42).

In the study, these knowledgeable employees are referred to as key knowledge workers (KKWs) because the research concerns the companies, in which competences and intellectual capital are the basic factors of high competitiveness. In the literature, it has been assumed to define key knowledge workers as the top class specialists, knowledge which they have acquired is not only advanced, but also innovative and unique and therefore it is always of highly individual nature. It can, therefore, be assumed that one of the challenges – conceptual and practical – is involving and encouraging the KKWs to share knowledge (experience, skills, good practices, ideas) with other employees of an organization (Lin and Lee, 2004, pp. 108–125).

The purpose of the study is to identify both motives and conditions acting as incentives for KKWs to share their individual knowledge with other employees. The empirical research was conducted in 2011 and 2012 and was based on a sample consisting of 50 enterprises. Various research methods were applied, i.e. using in-depth subject literature studies, preliminary and basic surveys and interviews of selected key workers. One of the significant results of the author's studies (Morawski, 2016; Morawski and Szałko, 2015; Morawski, 2014), that have been conducted for years, is the development of a set of characteristic features of a key knowledge worker defining his/her competences, organizational roles, motivations, etc.

The remainder of the paper consists of the theoretical, methodological, empirical and discussion sections. Firstly, the characteristics of knowledge workers are provided, the key assumptions of knowledge management and knowledge sharing concepts are explained. Secondly, the methodology of the empirical study is described. Thirdly, the results of interviews with key knowledge workers are presented and compared and contrasted with the outcomes of questionnaire surveys conducted among entrepreneurs and managers. Fourthly, the research findings are discussed in order to provide recommendations for business practice.

2. Key knowledge workers, knowledge management and knowledge sharing

The key employees of the highest quality intellectual capital, depending on the adopted goals and implemented personnel programs, they are defined as talented employees, creative leaders, etc. It should be assumed *ex ante* that in the conditions of the knowledge-based economy, key employees belong to the category of knowledge workers. Hence, explaining who the key employees are and what characteristics they have, first of all requires determining the properties of a broader category of employees i.e. 'knowledge workers' (Lowe, 2002).

Highly gifted people represent the core of the knowledge-based economy (Morawski, 2018). The knowledge-based economy creation and development has resulted in a rapid demand for knowledge workers, due to the large increase in the number of enterprises fully based on knowledge, i.e. the so-called knowledge intensive firms (Huang, 2011, pp. 924–944). Their activities are based on creativity and high competences. In the literature of management science, they are often called 'knowledge workers'. Well-educated, talented employees are now responsible for finding new solutions, which are translated into the development of their companies. The analysis of the subject literature provides some, but not many ideas on how to manage knowledge workers. The term of a 'knowledge worker' is included among the concepts which characterize different categories and groups of employees distinguished among other members of an organization by a significantly higher level of expertise and experience, skills, talent, predispositions, etc. In a broader sense, in the conditions of the knowledge-based economy these workers create knowledge (or are potentially ready for it) based on available information. Knowledge workers are the employees, whose main capital is knowledge. They include software developers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, inventors, scientists, teachers, financial analysts, architects and many others. As businesses increase their dependence on information technology, the number of fields in which knowledge workers must operate has expanded dramatically (Adelstein, 2007, pp. 853–871).

Probably, the briefest definition of this category of workers is offered by Abbasi, who states that knowledge workers are the ones who add value to an organization based on what they actually know (Abbasi et al., 2009, pp. 367–370). Davenport perceives knowledge workers

as people with high degrees of expertise, education, or experience. Davenport says that the primary purpose of a knowledge workers' job involves creation, distribution, or application of knowledge. Knowledge workers think for a living (Davenport, 2005).

The analysis of subject literature (Abbasi et al., 2009; Davenport, 2005; Horwitz et al., 2008; Huang, 2011; Mladkova, 2013) allows concluding that the term knowledge workers covers the category of employees distinguished by the following characteristics:

- favoring a high level of autonomy in the workplace;
- high professional and intellectual competencies supported by unique knowledge and experience;
- ability for team work;
- versatile skills of creative thinking in suggesting new and original solutions;
- interpersonal, leadership oriented skills resulting from high intellectual potential and intensive professional activity;
- applying knowledge in its various processes, from acquiring and creating through sharing and using in the carried out tasks;
- involvement, at different organizational levels, in creating new knowledge constituting the basis for innovative processes and solutions;
- creative thinking is the major part of their activity;
- presenting 'tacit' knowledge which offers opportunities for creating added value in an organization.

Currently, knowledge is considered to be one of fundamental sources of corporate strategic advantage. The major part of company employees have to participate in the processes of knowledge recognition, acquisition, absorption, accumulation, transfer and commercial implementation. Knowledge, as a basic resource of an organization, requires a systemic approach, combining the related elements of an enterprise strategy, organizational culture, organizational forms, information management and personal approach (Morawski et al., 2017, pp. 61–66).

In recent years, knowledge management has emerged as one of the prime concerns of human resource management. The best HR practices have always been concentrated on knowledge management (Hislop, 2003). Knowledge sharing has received much attention because the processes of innovation, organizational learning, and the development of new skills need new knowledge from both inside and outside the

company to increase the company's productivity and maintain its competitive advantages (Cabrera et al., 2002; Calantone et al., 2002; Mooradian et al., 2006; Chua and Pan, 2008; Gupta 2008).

Knowledge management is defined as "the effective learning processes associated with exploration, exploitation and sharing of human knowledge (tacit and explicit) that use appropriate technology and cultural environments to enhance an organization's intellectual capital and performance" (Jashapara, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, a company needs strongly motivated, involved and competent employees to achieve the expected effects.

The knowledge sharing process is an element of a wider category covering knowledge transfer processes. It consists in transferring knowledge during communication processes and requires cooperation and direct contact. The process of knowledge sharing refers mainly to passing on knowledge based on individual experience, practically tested skills, personal opinions, judgements and values. Knowledge sharing is primarily concerned with tacit knowledge conversion into explicit one. Intense interpersonal contacts, organization enhanced learning processes, team work, etc. are, among others, fundamental for such conversion. The knowledge management is mainly managing the workers who have this knowledge. Managing the knowledge workers leads to transforming the human capital, which is exclusive for the persons who have it, into the intellectual capital which is accessible for the entire organization (Dalkir, 2005). Personal knowledge of key employees, developed over the years, is an excellent basis for building individual knowledge of other employees, followed by organizational knowledge of the company. Effective knowledge transfer not only provides access to knowledge (including silent one), but also leads to the development of knowledge exchange procedures and improvement of organizational learning processes (Manaf et al., 2011).

In the author's model of sharing knowledge (one of the elements of personnel strategy regarding KKW's), the concept and method of knowledge sharing have been included. The model constitutes the systematized set of consecutive conceptual components covering theoretical assumptions and methodical elements, which relate to the problems of relevant practical aspects that should be taken into account when implementing the method (objectives, determinants, operation pattern) (Morawski, 2017, pp. 135–168).

3. Method of study

The research was conducted in 2011 and 2012 and was based on a sample consisting of 50 enterprises. The target group covered enterprises located in western and south-western Poland. A variety of research methods was employed, including: in-depth subject literature studies, preliminary and basic surveys and interviews of selected key workers. During the study two research tools were applied to collect data, i.e.: a survey questionnaire addressed to entrepreneurs and managers and an interview questionnaire with a list of open questions addressed to KKW's. The research used non-random sampling by selecting the so-called purposive sampling. The preliminary research covered 14 enterprises, whereas the proper (basic) research was conducted in the group of 50 enterprises.

The survey questionnaire applied in the study included 18 questions divided into 3 thematic blocks: company management, key employee profile and key workers involved in the knowledge sharing process. The questions were mostly of closed type ones. Company owners or top managers were the questionnaire respondents.

An interview consisted of open questions and its purpose was to provoke key employees for presenting deeper reflections and their own, personal opinions. The attention was mainly focused on finding out the real motives underlying knowledge sharing, as well as specifying situations in which knowledge sharing takes place and what factors encourage this group of workers to share their knowledge with others. 50 key employees were interviewed, one from each company. They were selected after talks with business owners and managers. An interview consisted of fourteen open questions and its purpose was to provoke key employees for presenting deeper reflections and their own, personal opinions. The focus was given to finding out the real motives underlying knowledge sharing, as well as specifying situations in which knowledge sharing takes place and what factors encourage this group of workers to share their knowledge with others.

4. Results presentation

Table 1 presents five crucial questions selected from interviews, frequently repeated responses and the author's comments.

Table 1. The summary of responses provided by key employees during interviews

No.	Questions	Core idea of response	Comment
1.	Are you aware of being the key knowledge worker?	high awareness of one's own strong points apparent self-confidence and confidence in one's own beliefs	The questioned employees are fully aware of being key employees, but they neither manifest it in their behavior nor show arrogance and overconfidence.
2.	What were the core milestones in your career in the enterprise?	advantages for the company from the implemented projects as an idea provider and their executor – team leader managing a new department obtaining new knowledge and skills which the other employees do not present	The questioned KKW's frequently come forward with initiatives for work organization processes or the other employees' competencies improvement.
3.	In what situations does knowledge sharing process occur most frequently?	team work taking care of a new employee in his/her induction period playing the role of an internal coach explaining current issues providing instruction at the workplace providing consultancy in new situations	The questioned KKW's were performing different roles and functions in an enterprise, both managerial and executive. They were in the past or currently are functioning as management board proxies, managers of departments, leaders of temporary teams, auditors, recognized specialists.
4.	What are the motives for participating in the knowledge sharing process?	the sense of security and stability in an enterprise employment contract for a long time period building and maintaining professional authority gaining recognition, admiration for the obtained professional knowledge responsibility for the organization and planned results of teamwork financial motivation	The interviewed KKW's have usually been employed in their company for a long time, longer than 7–8 years.

No.	Questions	Core idea of response	Comment
5.	Are there any special or additional motivating incentives necessary for the process of knowledge sharing to occur?	work organization enhancing the exchange of knowledge frequent formal and informal meetings individual participation in different projects unlimited access to supervisors including top company management higher autonomy in carrying out the so far performed tasks special permanent financial remuneration for participating in the process of co-workers education sharing awards received by a team made up of employees with whom knowledge was shared	The questioned KKWS usually expect different incentives, both financial and non-financial factors.

Source: own study.

The comparison of selected findings from the conducted surveys (based on the questionnaire survey addressed to entrepreneurs and managers and interviews addressed to KKWs) in the cross-section of individual groups of respondents (stakeholders of the knowledge sharing process) allows formulating the following conclusions:

- (1) All the respondents, while identifying the characteristics of key employees, indicated a relatively similar set of attributes. Above all, confidence entrusted in key employees by other colleagues is of crucial importance. The key employees themselves emphasized respect they experience from co-workers.
- (2) Other important features which distinguish the category of analyzed employees are as follows: knowledge, experience as well as active attitudes and behaviors: responsibility, commitment, initiating changes.
- (3) Compared and contrasted with the opinions of managers or owners and experts, expressed in the questionnaire survey, the interviewed key employees indicated different factors enhancing knowledge sharing. The surveyed managers or

owners and experts highlighted the importance of HRM strategy, organizational culture, and key employees' competences. In turn, the key employees indicated primarily the stabilization of employment, support received from managers, financial remuneration, and thus more specific factors, closer to their daily management practice.

- (4) All groups of respondents pointed to the pursuit of the key knowledge workers towards building their professional position, gaining trust among co-workers, the sense of responsibility for the company and the development of other colleagues.
- (5) Diverse motivating measures were indicated, of both material and non-material nature. There is a noticeable absence of using non-standard forms of employment and motivation, different from those commonly applied to other employees. Such forms as, for example, specific HR programs (including talent management programs), share in the enterprise's profits, the possibility of purchasing shares/stocks of the enterprise based on preferential terms and conditions, individual development and promotion programs are not used.
- (6) The key knowledge workers expect organizational comfort which provides them with extensive independence and opportunities for professional skills advancement. They also value organizational culture in which competencies and knowledge are respected.

5. Discussion

Time and the place of work do not matter. Knowledge workers can do work anywhere and for every employer. Therefore, managing knowledge workers can be a difficult task. Most knowledge workers prefer some level of autonomy, and do not like being overseen or managed. Projects must be carefully considered before assigning to a knowledge worker, as their interest and goals will affect the quality of the completed project. Knowledge workers must be treated as unique people. If the workers who have the esteemed skills feel that they are not appreciated, they can simply go away to the rivals. Without key employees' satisfaction it is hard to establish an effective model of knowledge transfer

in an enterprise. This, however, is not an easy problem to solve. Similar, or even higher salary may be offered to them in another company.

Creation, transfer and implementation of knowledge requires a special approach towards individuals, who have the highest level of intellectual capital. Without them an ongoing inflow of new knowledge, original ideas and innovations would not be possible. Owing to their high qualifications and experience they present knowledge which is unavailable for others. Therefore, sharing knowledge by key knowledge workers with other members of the company's crew becomes the natural component in establishing future of any organization and improving its core competencies. However, for knowledge sharing to be real, company top management has to prepare adequate conditions, particularly in regard to organizational culture, direct motivation, professional development and framework. These factors constitute the context of both created and implemented methods in human capital management, which encourage for intellectual involvement in company operations. The choice of such factors conducive to working environment for knowledge sharing by KKW's is recommended according to research of 50 companies operating in Poland.

In Polish conditions, the factors that support knowledge sharing between the high potential employees and the rest of the staff have a certain specificity. In the Polish companies, a key employee usually is not a star recruited from another company, but rather a long-time employee, to whom others trust and show respect. Indeed, a key employee expects organizational comfort, which provides him/her with extensive independence and opportunities for professional skills advancement. A key employee also values organizational culture in which competencies and knowledge are respected and have impact on the entire company personnel attitudes and behaviors.

6. Conclusions

The study has identified motives and conditions acting as incentives for key knowledge workers to share their individual knowledge with other employees. The motives of knowledge sharing by key knowledge workers are as follows: financial motivation, sense of responsibility for the results of the organization and the results of teamwork, building

and consolidating professional authority. The following conditions are required to be established to support knowledge sharing by key knowledge workers: organic leadership, organization of team work, communication processes, HR processes.

The identification of aforementioned motives and conditions acting as incentives for key knowledge workers to share their individual knowledge with other employees provides practical implication for business. The knowledge-oriented enterprises have to create the adequate working environment for their key knowledge workers. The comfort zone for the such employees guarantees that they become aware investors of their own intellectual capital. Their engagement in the knowledge sharing process is the key issue in regard to the achieving the long-term, sustainable competitive advantage.

The originality of the study derives from the fact that the issue of motives and conditions for key knowledge workers to share their knowledge has not been much studied, especially in the context of the companies operating in Poland. Comparing and contrasting the opinions of the interviewed key knowledge workers with the point of view represented by the entrepreneurs and managers of their companies provides additional value.

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