UNDERSTANDING OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING: ACADEMICS’ PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Knowledge is seen as the most important strategic resource in an organisation, especially in universities where knowledge is produced, applied and disseminated among academics. Studies on knowledge sharing have emerged as a key research area that has gained attention especially during the twentieth century. Though the topic is popular, the construct has not been well defined theoretically nor has it been properly operationalized. As there appears little consistency, it is very difficult to define knowledge sharing. This apparent lack of consistency is problematic for developing an understanding of the term. In this regard, this study intends to explore the definitions of knowledge sharing as perceived by academics in higher education institutions in Maldives. This study employed qualitative approach to collect data, consisting of nine semi-structured interviews of academics, from three higher education institutions. Participants were selected by utilizing purposeful sampling technique. Initial thematic approach revealed two main themes. The emergent themes are presented by using instances from interview transcripts which is linked and supported by literature. This study reports preliminary findings, and final results will be reported when data analysis is fully completed.

Keywords: knowledge sharing, academics, higher education institution

1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing (KS) is meant to be the core fundamental activity in educational organizations. Decades of research have supported that sharing of knowledge contributes to knowledge application, innovation, and ultimately the sustainable competitive advantage of the organization (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Kukko, 2013). As the markets are becoming global with new competitors, it is essential for knowledge-driven organizations like higher education institutions to focus on generating innovative ideas and explore means to disseminate the new knowledge created by its employees.

Thus, how to make use of the knowledge to gain competitive advantage is the central concern in the new economy (Cheng, Ho, & Lau, 2009; Davenport and Prusak., 1998; Drucker, 2012). One way to utilize the knowledge is, by sharing the knowledge its employees have generated effectively, which involves careful planning. However, in order to facilitate KS, it is quite often that we question ourselves on what it really means to us when we say “Knowledge Sharing”.

Most of the existing literature shows that researchers have not reached a consensus on this term (Sheng Wang & Noe, 2010). Many definitions exist in the literature, most comes from business background (Jahani, Ramayah, & Effendi, 2011; Nawaz & Gomes, 2014;
Ramakrishnan & Yasin, 2012; Xue, Bradley, & Liang, 2006) and these differ from researcher to researcher. Since the term carries a lot of meaning, this study therefore, aims to explore the definitions of knowledge sharing as perceived by academics’ in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Maldives. The findings of this study may add value to the scarce information available on the term; Knowledge Sharing and assist the researchers in defining this term.

2. Literature Review

Conceptionalization of Knowledge
In today’s economy, the concept of knowledge sharing in organizations has become the center of attention in recent literature, with knowledge being recognized as the most important resource and asset of an organization (Bollinger & Smith, 2001; Ipe, 2003; Nassuora, 2011). Prior to being able to understand and analyze knowledge sharing, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the way knowledge is perceived. Knowledge is an abstract notion that is been defined in numerous ways and till date no consensus has emerged.

Definition of knowledge differs enormously, mainly due to the different perspectives among scholars and practitioners. Despite various classification and definition, the most common and practical classification is with tacit and explicit knowledge distinction (Pathirage, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2007). This distinction of tacit and explicit knowledge was originally developed by Michael Polanyi (1983; 1998), which was later popularised by Nonaka (1991; 1994; 1995) using his own interpretation of Polanyi’s work. (Polanyi, 1967), argued that tacit and explicit knowledge are intertwined with each other where tacit knowledge forms the basis of all the knowledge, and this was supported by Jasimuddin, Klein, & Connell (2005); they commented that tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge are inseparable. Likewise, in agreement with this view, Tsoukas (1996), asserts that tacit and explicit knowledge are like “two sides of the same coin”.

However, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), critiqued Polanyi’s ideas and claimed that explicit and tacit knowledge are two different entities. They believe that sharing of tacit knowledge is seen as an act of simultaneous processing of complexities whereas, explicit knowledge is often about previous occurrences. Similarly, Mooradian (2005), also asserts that tacit knowledge is intrinsically different from explicit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is viewed as knowledge that is personal, which resides in the individual’s mind or experiences, such as know-how or skills (Nonaka, 1994). Choi and Lee (2003), state that tacit knowledge is gained through experiences and work practices which can be then transferred by observing and applying it. Similarly, Barth (2002), tacit knowledge is embedded in people's mind and it is quite difficult to articulate. People use different ways to convey their tacit knowledge to others. For instance; metaphors, analogies, demonstrations and stories (Stewart, 1997). However, managing and sharing tacit knowledge has becomes one of the major challenges for almost every organisation (Mládková, 2012)

Explicit knowledge, in contrast, can be easily codified and communicated in the form of documents and manuals (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), archived and protected in organisation (Choi & Lee, 2003).Lee (2001), defines explicit knowledge as knowledge that can be expressed in symbolic or written form. Teaching being the core function of the academics, sharing of knowledge is mostly based on sharing of pedagogical content knowledge
Based on the definitions it can be implied that tacit knowledge is difficult to explicitly represent whereas, explicit knowledge can be easily expressed and disseminated in various forms. This gives the expression that explicit knowledge is the most common knowledge which is readily available in the work place most of the time and obtaining tacit knowledge from individual’s is a challenge due to the nature of the knowledge.

Definitions of Knowledge Sharing (KS)
Research on KS in business sector is on the rise compared to the context of Higher Education Institutions (Goh & Sandhu, 2013; Kim & Ju, 2008; Sohail & Daud, 2009). Though there exists literature on knowledge sharing, understanding the concept of knowledge sharing has become a dilemma, as the concept has been defined in numerous ways. In the existing literature, researchers have used diverse expressions to define knowledge sharing. Among the various definitions of KS, Santosh and Panda (2016) define KS as the exchange of tacit and explicit knowledge jointly among individuals and creating new knowledge. Likewise, Davenport and Prusak (2003), define KS as a voluntary act by an individual who participates in the knowledge exchange for the purpose of current and future benefits. The underlying purpose is to share and utilise the knowledge to improve group performance (Cheng et al., 2009). KS is considered as sharing communication of all types of knowledge including tacit as well as explicit knowledge (Al-Hawamdeh, 2003). KS is about expressing insights, ideas, experiences, skills, expertise, understanding through communicating and transferring knowledge either explicit or implicit form within individuals or group of people (Kim & Ju, 2008). Sohail and Daud (2009), refer knowledge sharing as “exchanging experience, events, thought or understanding on anything with an expectation to gain more insights and understanding about something for temporary curiosity” (p.129). This implies that the knowledge is being shared for both parties who have a need to share that particular knowledge at a particular time.

Teaching being the core function of the academics, sharing of knowledge is mostly based on sharing of pedagogical content knowledge (Koppelman, 2008; Margerum-Leys & Marx, 2004; Shouhong Wang, 2008), where the academics share their explicit knowledge through lecture notes, power point slides, worksheets and other teaching and learning related materials. This teaching related sharing enriches the knowledge that is being delivered to the students, resulting in quality teaching.

KS has been associated with phrases like experiences and practices, skills and expertise, sharing information, sharing of know-how, and exchange of ideas, depending on the context. Reflecting on the definitions that are offered in the literature, for the purpose of this study, the term “knowledge sharing” is used as a mutual process through which ideas, opinions, experiences, skills, expertise and documents are exchanged form one individual to another to gain new knowledge.
3. Methodology

Research Design
The study employed a qualitative research methodology to gain insights into the nature of knowledge sharing among academics in higher education institutions in the Maldives. The researcher viewed knowledge sharing as the central phenomenon requiring detailed understanding (Creswell, 2014). Considering the nature of the phenomenon (i.e., knowledge sharing), the researcher followed Merriam (2009) who explained “the key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants perspectives, not the researcher’s” (p.14).

Participants
The purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants for the study. Participants were recruited using two criteria: (1) full time staff; (2) staff with a minimum of three years’ work experience in that particular institution. A total of nine academics were recruited consisting of deans (D), senior lectures (SL) and lectures (L). The researcher purposefully included a range of academics for the purpose of comparable analysis. These academics represented three well established higher education institutions in the Maldives which includes both public and private. To avoid gender disparity, participants of both sexes were included. All the academics were identified as D1 to D3, SL1 to SL3 and L1 to L3 accordingly throughout this paper.

Interviews
Data were collected via semi-structured interviews which Tracy (2013) described as “one which provides opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via a path that is organic, adaptive and oftentimes energizing” (p.132). Face to face interviews conducted in the institutions the academics designated. Before the interview, each participant was given a consent form and an information sheet outlining the objective of the research, the criteria for participants, research procedures and participants rights. During the process of the interviews, the researcher probed for further information, elaboration or clarification of responses as deemed appropriate. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded.

Data Analysis
All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded. At first, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. After reading, the documents were uploaded to Atlas.ti 8. The researcher used cross-case analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to study each participant as a whole entity, using line-by-line coding of each participant’s interview responses, followed by a comparative analysis of all nine participants. The similar codes were grouped and categorised into two main themes. Next, the researcher shared the transcripts with a colleague and got to analyse those independently, and then discussed together. This type of cross checking of major codes was conducted to ensure consistency of the findings and to increase the chance of validation of the results (Creswell, 2014).

Confirmability
In order to secure respondent validation, the findings were sent to interviewees to confirm and check to see if they saw their personal perspectives being represented in all the findings. In addition, the interviewees were asked to comment on the accuracy of verbatim quotes and obtained approval from the nine participants to use their personal quotes in this study.
The identified emergent themes are first described and then supported by verbatim quotations from the participants, linked to the literature and presented in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study aimed to find out how academics perceive knowledge sharing in higher education institution in the Maldives. Based on the results of this study two main themes emerged in the analysis that included: Theme 1: Sharing of tacit knowledge, and Theme 2: Sharing of explicit knowledge.

Theme 1: Sharing of Tacit Knowledge

There was one category that emerged from this theme.

- **Sharing of know-how**

Individual’s possess slightly different types of tacit and explicit knowledge and they use and apply it in their unique ways. The following narratives conveys their uniqueness.

.....sharing know-how or the expertise to someone...... (L3)

.....to share the know-how, because that will speed up certain things, it’s like re-inventing the wheels.... (D3).

D3 further elaborated by providing example:

“for example in our case we have to deal with lots of code, so the code again, the other people’s perspective it is very different, say there is something called IT sector, the people who mostly work with the operating system and above, so in our engineering, we normally do the coding from hardware to the machine level coding...”(D3).

L2 and SL2 expressed their views on KS in a similar manner

....sharing of the skills, ideas or any information that is shared in order to apply that in their real life.... (L2)

..sharing of experiences, and sharing of transferable knowledge.... (SL2)

As tacit knowledge is context specific and personal in nature, it is very difficult to formalize, capture and share tacit knowledge. It is not found in books, manuals or data base. It encompasses mental modes, experiences, insights and beliefs. Though the concept of knowledge sharing is conceptualized in numerous ways, the perception of academics on knowledge sharing in the Maldives are in agreement with how most of the researchers have defined knowledge sharing. Likewise, the most widely accepted classification of knowledge is that of Polanyi (1967) who classifies knowledge as either tacit or explicit. From the reviewed literature, it is evident that sharing and managing tacit knowledge has become one of the most challenging tasks for the organizations (Mládková, 2012), this finding is in agreement in which out of the nine participants four participants definition fall under the umbrella of tacit knowledge, knowledge that resides in the mind of people (Mládková, 2012). Participants (L2 and L3) definition, “sharing of ideas, experiences and skills”, is the most
common definition among all the three which is related to the existing literature (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Mengis & Eppler, 2005; Pangil & Nasurddin, 2013; Savolainen, 2017). The participants noted that the ideas, experiences and skills that they share with the colleagues would facilitate in speeding up the work process, resulting in producing quality work, which will ultimately lead to the growth of the institution at large (based on the interviews).

On the other hand, it was interesting to find out that the participants (D3 and L3), happen to come from the same institution. Unlike the other two higher education institutions, the institution that they belong, the focus of education is on developing skills where teaching and learning is based on providing technical and practical knowledge. The skills and expertise are been transferred using different hands on activities. It was indeed a sad fact to highlight as participants noted that this knowledge is very limited, rather non existing in higher education institutions in the Maldives (evidence from the interviews). This is a striking finding as this is an issue of great concern, especially in a sector like higher education where sharing of knowledge is among the core responsibilities of academics.

Theme 1: Sharing of Explicit Knowledge

Most of the academic’s definition falls under this theme. There were two categories that emerged from this theme including sharing know-what, and sharing of pedagogical content knowledge.

- **Sharing of know-what**

  This “know-what” or explicit knowledge is carefully codified and readily available and communicated using different means like documents, books, files and many more. The following three participants narratives are very much similar to one another.

  .............knowledge sharing is transferring the information that one has acquired to another...(D1).

  Adding on L3 noted:

  .............me educating someone about what I know, however, them being able to apply what they learn in their life......(L3)

  Another remarked:

  .............making others aware of the knowledge that you have gained....(SL3)

- **Sharing of pedagogical content knowledge**

  Knowledge related to the field is of utmost important especially institutions like higher education where the main focus is to mould graduates to be better citizens who can serve the nation. The narratives of the following participants have proven that it is essential for them to educate the young minds.

  .............is sharing academic work done by one person with others...(L1)

  L1 further elaborated on what was being said:

  .............academics are trained in different areas, so it is really important to share what we find out in , and what we read and the knowledge we gain, it is really important to
share with others, because not everybody is doing the same work, so everybody won’t be getting the same opportunity, I mean to work in different areas, so it is important to share the knowledge we gain through an area with the other colleagues as well as beyond that….. (L1).

Similarly, SL1 stated;

…….knowledge sharing is sharing information which you get about the modules that you are teaching…… (SL1)

Unlike tacit knowledge, explicit knowledge is easy to articulate and capture. Majority of the definitions provided by the academics fit to the category of explicit knowledge. There were two sub categories under the theme explicit knowledge. Among them is “know-what” in other words sharing of what you know to others. This definition relates to the definition of Al-Hawamdeh (2003), where he defined it as communication of all types of knowledge.

Academics’ being the knowledge workers, working in the higher education sector, the category “sharing of pedagogical content knowledge” is very much related to the work that they do regularly. This sharing includes sharing of the notes, power point presentations, worksheets, and other related materials that they prepare to teach a particular module. Knowledge sharing as a means of “sharing pedagogical content knowledge” is in line with many studies (Koppelman, 2008; Margerum-Leys & Marx, 2004; Shouhong Wang, 2008). This sharing is of utmost importance for academics as this enriches the knowledge that is been delivered to the students.

To conclude, this study was conducted to explore the definitions of knowledge sharing as perceived by academics’ in higher education institutions in Maldives. As, effective knowledge sharing is vital for the growth of an institution, the findings revealed how the nine academics’ defined knowledge sharing. The finding of this study is similar to the existing studies on knowledge sharing. The contribution of this paper is to enrich the existing literature on the notion of knowledge sharing in higher education institution. The findings have implication for the academics in understanding of this phenomenon as this may aid them to contribute effectively to the institution. This paper reports the initial findings of a major study which explores knowledge sharing among academics in higher education in Maldives.

References


