

Tacit knowledge sharing in online environments: locating “Ba” within a platform for public sector professionals.

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Abstract

Introduction

Results from a survey undertaken by members of an online platform that incorporates social media features, and enables knowledge sharing amongst public sector professionals, are presented in this paper. The work responds to a call to enhance understanding of information behaviour and knowledge sharing practices online (Widen-Wulff, Ek, Ginman, Perttila, Sodergard, & Totterman, 2008, p. 352). It has been argued that new knowledge in this area is important to the development of strategies designed to support informal learning activities (Mills, Knezek & Khaddage 2014, p. 333). These include challenges regarding the transfer of tacit knowledge.

There are two key findings from the study explored in this paper. The first is related to the various roles an online platform may play in the facilitation of tacit knowledge sharing, and the second to the support of social interactions online. More importantly, this research reveals that all four aspects of the concept of Ba (or ‘space’), as noted by Nonaka and Konno (1998), can be found in online environments.

Background

Literature that considers the themes of tacit knowledge sharing and social media is scant, especially as related to the public sector. This prompts a need to broaden the understanding of the domain, taking into account extant work on commonly used tacit knowledge sharing techniques such as Communities of Practice (Kingston, 2012). The findings of the study presented here also draw on prior work that considers the concept of Ba (Nonaka and Konno, 1998). Another important piece of work that has informed the study is that of Panahi, Watson & Partridge (2013). They argue that social media can facilitate the sharing of tacit knowledge by (1) initiating informal discussions among experts; (2) fostering collective intelligence; (3) providing a virtual, participatory and collaborative space to create new knowledge; and (4) making visible and accessible the tacit and personal knowledge.

Research design

Data for this study were collected by online survey. The link to the survey was distributed to members of the Knowledge Hub (KHub) – an online knowledge sharing platform which is hosted by a UK public service body. The survey was open for six weeks between 11 July and 26 August 2016. The survey respondents were based in various public and third sector organisations such as national and local government, the health service, and charities. A total of 1062 KHub members active on the platform's Scottish section completed the survey, the majority of whom were also based in Scotland¹. The survey responses were used to establish features of the participants' information landscape as related to KHub in particular, and social media tools in general. They also provided indicative demographic data to help profile the user population. At the end of the data collection period the survey data were imported into Excel and processed using survey analysis software (SmartSurvey).

Key findings: Facilitation of tacit knowledge sharing and support of social interactions

There are two key findings from the initial analysis of the survey data. The first is that KHub facilitates learning processes, expertise sharing, problem-solving, and innovation through social interactions. These activities belong to the technical dimension of tacit knowledge, understood as that which cannot be codified (Nonaka, 1994).

The second key finding is that two-thirds of respondents confirmed that social interactions are facilitated by the technological features of KHub. This supports the work of those who assert that knowledge is built through social interactions, such as within Communities of Practice (CoP) (for example, Hall & Graham 2004; Annabi & McGann, 2013). These social interactions, which occur in the face of commonly shared problems, provide a form of infrastructure for learning processes (as previously noted by Haghshenas, Sadeghzadeh & Nassiriyar (2014) and Ryan & O'Connor (2013)).

Discussion: Ba in online spaces

In 1998 Nonaka and Konno claimed that virtual spaces such as online networks or databases could be classed as one type of Ba (only). This is 'Systemizing Ba', i.e. virtual space for activities such as networking, collaboration, and reaching consensus online. However, the findings from this investigation, conducted almost two decades later and with reference to a platform that offers social media features, indicates that the three other types of Ba can also occur in virtual space. These are: (1) 'Originated Ba' - an existential space in which employees can potentially share their experiences through a socialisation process, (2) 'Dialoguing Ba' - a space which is used to share knowledge and skills through an externalisation process, and (3) 'Exercising Ba' - a space in which the absorption of new knowledge happens through an internalisation process.

The findings from this study support and extend those of previous work in the domain on the conversion of tacit knowledge from one person to another in a virtual context with reference to both Originated Ba and Dialoguing Ba (Martin-Niemi & Greatbanks, 2010). Equally, it confirms the suggestion that social media platforms may be similar to Ba (in that they represent space)

¹ KHub has approximately 17,000 members in Scotland.

(Razmerita, Kirchner & Nabeth, 2014), particularly in respect of enabling social interactions (Panahi, Watson & Partridge, 2013).

Conclusion and further work

The findings shared here encourage renewed consideration of the concept of Ba to take into account the use of online tools that facilitate social interactions. In particular, it invites detailed investigation of social media that were unavailable when the concept of Ba was first proposed in the late 1990s.

Further research, including analysis of data from follow-up interviews with members of the cohort that completed the survey, will extend consideration of the findings presented here. This larger study responds to calls for the two domains of knowledge management and human information behaviour to be considered together in terms of research approaches and theory development (Halbwirth & Olsson, 2007).

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