

## Motivational Mechanisms and Knowledge Sharing

Team incentives, knowledge sharing norms, relationships of trust and high goals affect knowledge sharing and performance.

Business success in the digital era is driven by information; knowledge sharing within organizations is crucial but not easy to achieve. If knowledge is power, then what motivates a worker to give up a source of advantage? If a worker shares knowledge, can she trust that it will be used correctly, or that she will be acknowledged for her contribution? Why should she take time from her own tasks to share information with others? In some organizations, even admitting that you need information may be perceived as risky. Understanding the different factors that motivate workers to share knowledge, and the ways that those factors interact, can help managers create an environment that results in the greatest amount of knowledge sharing, utilization and performance.

In their paper, "A Multi-Level Investigation of the Motivational Mechanisms Underlying Knowledge Sharing and Performance," Narda Quigley, former Smith School PhD student and now an assistant professor at Villanova University, Paul E. Tesluk, associate professor of management and organization, Edwin A. Locke, emeritus professor of management and organization, and Kathryn M. Bartol, Robert H. Smith Professor of Management and Organization, combine three different theories of motivation and explain how their interactions affect knowledge sharing and utilization in ways that affect performance.

The study is the first to integrate several different motivational mechanisms to explain and predict knowledge sharing. It also considers the perspectives of both the knowledge sharer and the knowledge recipient, examining what motivates someone to share knowledge and what motivates the recipient to use that knowledge effectively.

"Combining both perspectives resulted in a theoretical model that was more than the sum of its parts," says Tesluk.

Study participants worked on CELCOM21, a computer-based interactive management decision-making simulation that challenged them to increase their unit's market share. They worked in two-person groups, physically separated from their partners at networked computers in different rooms but able to communicate via instant messaging. Each participant was provided with unique information that, if shared and applied, would result in greatest success for their company.

The design of the study included three incentive pay conditions: individual, group, and a hybrid that consisted of both individual and group incentives. While knowledge providers working under hybrid systems shared more knowledge than those in the individual pay incentive system, they did not share as much knowledge as those working under pure group-based incentives. Incentives had more effect when mutual norms for knowledge sharing developed between the knowledge sender and recipient. This suggests that companies can motivate knowledge sharing by creating incentives that emphasize group performance and are strongly reinforced through clear norms for sharing.

"Rewarding individuals for knowledge sharing may send a mixed message," says Bartol. "Group incentives that reward cooperative behavior reinforce a culture of open exchange." Companies might also consider recognizing knowledge sharing in performance appraisals, recognizing and praising those who go out of their way to actively share their knowledge with others, and consistently highlighting common goals and objectives that can link potential knowledge providers and recipients.

Bartol and Tesluk found that knowledge recipients who were confident in their own ability to perform well on a task were more likely to set high goals for their own performance when they trusted their partners.

Workers must also be motivated to apply the new knowledge they have acquired in ways that promote performance. While both knowledge sharing and goal setting had direct effects on performance, performance was highest only when participants both had access to knowledge and set stretch goals for themselves. “The higher the goals were set, the higher the performance improvement, but only if people had access to new knowledge as well,” says Tesluk.

The study was conducted in the Smith School’s Netcentric Behavioral Lab, a setting that allowed the authors to control the knowledge sharing process in a way that is not possible in the field. “We were able to track what pieces of information were being shared and precisely when they were being shared,” says Tesluk. Future research might investigate how these findings generalize to knowledge workers in actual organizational settings.

“A Multi-Level Investigation of the Motivational Mechanisms Underlying Knowledge Sharing and Performance” will be published in *Organization Science*. For more information about this research, contact [kbartol@rhsmith.umd.edu](mailto:kbartol@rhsmith.umd.edu) or [ptesluk@rhsmith.umd.edu](mailto:ptesluk@rhsmith.umd.edu).