

A qualitative insight into key determinants of knowledge sharing in a public sector institution in Ghana

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors influencing knowledge sharing in a public sector institution in Ghana. A case study of the factors influencing knowledge sharing among employees at Afigya Kwabre District Assembly in the Ashanti Region of Ghana was used as the research design. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. A semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. The study found mutual trust, respect and care for one another, the quest for organizational success, education and experience level of employees as the significant factors influencing knowledge sharing in the Afigya Kwabre District Assembly.

Keywords

knowledge sharing, public sector institutions, Afigya Kwabre District Assembly, Ghana

Knowledge is a critical resource for public sector organizations as they try to deliver quality service to their clients.

Introduction

In recent times, knowledge has become the fuel powering our societies and economy. The success of society and organizations depends on how well they are able to share knowledge, learn from the knowledge they hold, and how they use it to create new value (Liyanage et al., 2009). Both public and private sector organizations have emphasized the importance of knowledge sharing for organizational performance and effectiveness (Noor and Salim, 2011; Kim and Lee, 2006). Knowledge does not exist only in documents and repositories, but is embedded in people's minds and demonstrated through their actions and behaviors (Al-Alawi et al., 2007). Knowledge sharing is the fundamental means through which employees can contribute to knowledge application and innovation (Jackson et al., 2006). There is widespread recognition that knowledge sharing is central to effective working and increasingly important within the public sector (Gorry, 2008; McAdam and Reid, 2000). It is critical to a firm's success

(Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Al-Alawi et al., 2007) as it leads to faster knowledge deployment to various units of an organization, which can be beneficial to the organization (Al-Alawi et al., 2007). In recent times, public sector organizations have been recognized as knowledge-based organizations (Willem and Buelens, 2007). Interest in knowledge management in the public sector has typically been driven by goals at the heart of new public sector management, such as those associated with improved service quality, efficiency, and resource utilization (McAdam and Reid, 2000). Knowledge has been recognized as an essential resource to public sector organizations (Willem and Buelens, 2007). Public organizations, for example those in Ghana, have to compete for resources (Luen and Al-Hawamdeh, 2001); there is

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therefore a need for knowledge sharing among employees. Enhancing knowledge sharing among public sector employees can enable lower level employees to benefit from senior employees' knowledge and experience before they retire (Amayah, 2013).

Despite the importance of knowledge sharing, the actual sharing of knowledge among employees remains complicated for managers, especially those in public sector organizations (Jacob and Ebrahimpur, 2001). Knowledge sharing is typically voluntary (Lin et al., 2008), and to facilitate knowledge sharing among public employees, it is imperative to understand the factors influencing employees' willingness to share knowledge (Amayah, 2013). Numerous authors contend that dissimilarities exist in the way people accept knowledge sharing, especially those from different national cultural backgrounds (Ribiere and Sitar, 2003; Yang, 2004; King et al., 2007). Some studies of factors influencing knowledge sharing have produced inconsistent results (Liao, 2008; Olatokun and Nwafor, 2012).

The objective of this study is to ascertain the factors that facilitate or negatively influence knowledge sharing among employees in a public sector organization, the Afigya Kwabre District Assembly, in Ghana.

The rest of the paper is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on a literature review, while the second presents the methodology employed. The third part focuses on data presentation and discussion of findings, while the last part provides conclusions and recommendations.

Knowledge sharing

Sohail and Daud (2009) define knowledge sharing as exchanging experience, events, thought or understanding of anything (in general) with an expectation to gain more insights and understanding about something for temporary curiosity. This implies reciprocity among people who are curious to know about something (Gouldner, 1960) until it becomes a norm (Rousseau, 1989). Knowledge sharing may be defined as the act of disseminating and making available knowledge that is already known (Tiwana, 2002). It is a social interaction culture, involving the exchange of employee knowledge, experiences and skills through the whole department or organization (Lin, 2007). Knowledge sharing is one of the processes in knowledge management (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). During this process, knowledge conversation takes place through socialization and combination. Through knowledge sharing, an individual's tacit knowledge is shared and thus becomes tacit knowledge for another party. The same process occurs for explicit

knowledge. In this process, knowledge is externalized and internalized in the individual and the organization (Noor and Salim, 2011). Knowledge sharing can occur in organizations whether the process is deliberately managed or not (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Knowledge sharing takes place between at least two parties, called actors (Lee and Hawamdeh, 2002), and cannot exist outside the human brain (Beveren, 2002). The outcome of knowledge sharing is the creation of new knowledge and innovation that will improve organizational performance (Hawamdeh, 2003).

Key determinants of knowledge sharing in the public sector

Effective knowledge sharing among employees is essential for public sector management and for providing excellent governance (Kim and Lee, 2006). However, studies on knowledge sharing, particularly in Ghana, are limited. Studies carried out in other countries have shown that factors affecting knowledge sharing are numerous; from 'social' issues, such as employee characteristics (Bock and Kim, 2002; Connelly and Kelloway, 2003; Ryu et al., 2003), organizational climate (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002; Lin and Lee, 2004; Bock et al., 2005) and organizational culture (Martiny, 1998; Kelloway and Barling, 2000) to 'technical', such as technologies and tools (Stoddart, 2001; Song, 2002), and socio-technical issues, such as organizational climate and information technology support (Lin and Lee, 2006). Lam and Lambermont (2010) note that knowledge sharing is a difficult task: the willingness of individuals to share and integrate their knowledge is one of the central barriers. Employees may share (or not share) knowledge for various reasons. For example, some employees may share their knowledge for altruistic reasons or because of reciprocation (Kankanhalli et al., 2005). Again, employees may share their knowledge as a way of helping develop personal relationships with peers, or simply to manage the impression they make on others. These different intentions may influence how and with whom knowledge is shared; supervisors, co-workers within the same unit, or managers across units who are not known on a personal level (Bolino, 1999; Kelley, 1967; Wang and Raymond, 2010).

Some researchers categorize the factors influencing knowledge sharing as individual, organizational and technological (Riege, 2005; Van den Brink 2003). On the individual level, Burgess' (2005) study shows that perceived rewards for knowledge sharing and low perceived risk regarding sanctions positively influence

knowledge sharing. Prior research also suggests that perceived trust (Friesl et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2005; Renzl et al., 2005) and care (von Krogh, 1998) from other organization members positively influence knowledge sharing. For Burgess (2005), inter-individual factors for knowledge sharing are concerned with individuals' impression management behavior, that can be aimed at acquiring information from others or can potentially fulfill a self-protective function (avoiding embarrassment by sharing knowledge with others). Membership in a social group like a work organization, department or project team tends to be an emotionally significant aspect of individuals and their self-concept. The sense of belonging influences their interactions and communication to a certain extent (Friesl et al., 2011). Depending on the degree of belonging and identification with a group, knowledge sharing might be affected. If individual identities promote distinctions between 'we-they' and 'us-them', this distinction may lead to negative stereotyping and distrust among the members of the team (Brewer, 1995; Friesl et al., 2011). Research shows that team-based structures and horizontal coordination result in higher levels of knowledge sharing (Friesl et al., 2011). Riege, (2005) and Jain et al. (2007) note lack of communication skills, lack of social networks, differences in culture, lack of time, lack of trust, lack of motivation, lack of awareness of the benefit of knowledge sharing, lack of interaction, and fear of not receiving recognition, as individual barriers to knowledge sharing. Evaluation apprehension inhibits knowledge sharing in that it may result from self-perceptions that shared knowledge is inaccurate, not valued, and likely to result in unfavorable criticism from others (Bordia et al., 2006). Employees' personal characteristics may also influence the extent to which they share knowledge for different purposes (new employees may be more likely to share knowledge than more senior employees because they have greater motivation to try to impress their supervisors) (Bolino, 1999; Kelley, 1967; Wang and Raymond, 2010). King et al. (2007) found that some Africans (both black and white) who received schooling from predominantly western philosophical perspectives are sometimes influenced by western culture to an extent that they become reluctant to share knowledge.

Connelly and Kelloway (2003) and Lin (2007) note that support from management has been shown to be positively associated with employees' perception of knowledge sharing culture (employee trust, willingness of experts to help others) and willingness to share knowledge. Lee et al. (2006) and Gorry (2008) found

that top management support affected both the level and quality of knowledge sharing through influencing employee commitment to knowledge management. Similarly, Liao (2008) found that a manager's control of rewards for desired behavior and the employees' belief that the manager had knowledge and expertise in the area were positively related to employees' self-reported knowledge sharing. Both social exchange theory and agency theory have been used in studies examining the management support-knowledge sharing relationship. Overall, these studies show that management support probably influences knowledge sharing.

Kim and Lee (2006) found that an organizational emphasis on performance-based pay systems contributed to knowledge sharing. Incentives, including recognition and rewards, have been recommended as interventions to facilitate knowledge sharing and help build a supportive culture (Hansen et al., 1999; Liebowitz, 2003; Nelson et al., 2006; Wang and Raymond, 2010). Contrary to the perceived positive effect of rewards and incentives, Chang et al. (2007) showed that outcome-based rewards and sufficient rewards for effort did not foster knowledge sharing among product development team members. Olatokun and Nwafor (2012) also found that expected organizational rewards did not significantly influence employee attitudes and intentions toward knowledge sharing.

Al-Alawi et al. (2007) observed the factors influencing the success of knowledge sharing as trust, communication between staff, information systems, reward system and organizational structure. The main organizational barriers inhibiting knowledge sharing are: lack of rewards, lack of support from top management, ineffective human resource management practices, weak organizational structure, inadequate infrastructure, poor organizational culture, office politics, lack of knowledge management or knowledge sharing strategies, lack of formal and informal avenues to share knowledge, competition between business units and lack of training (Riege, 2005; Ling et al., 2009; Jain et al., 2007; Yao et al., 2007). However, Szulanski (1996) concludes that knowledge sharing depletes the time and effort available for other work activities that can result in greater personal benefits and rewards by exceeding expectations on performance goals.

Lack of integration of IT systems/processes, lack of technical support, lack of maintenance of integrated IT systems, people's reluctance to use IT systems and lack of training for familiarization of IT systems and processes are noted to be the technological barriers to knowledge sharing (Riege, 2005; Van den Brink 2003).

The Afigya Kwabre District Assembly

The Afigya Kwabre District Assembly is one of the 27 districts in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. It was established on November 1, 2007. It was carved out of the former Kwabre and Afigya-Sekyere District Assemblies, and has Kodie as its capital. It is a second-level administrative subdivision within the framework of government policies, covering a land area of about 342.3 square kilometers, with a population of 136,140. The Assembly has the following departments: General Administration, Finance, Education, Agriculture, Town and Country Planning, Social Welfare and Community Development, Health, Works, Disaster Prevention, Immigration Service, Birth and Death Registry and Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice. All these departments report to the District Chief Executive. The workforce of the Assembly is a blend of experienced staff transferred from other district assemblies and new recruits emanating from 10 regions in Ghana (District Planning Co-Ordinating Unit, 2012).

Methodology

This study employed the case study design, which was selected because it provided in-depth knowledge about the factors influencing knowledge sharing among employees at the Afigya Kwabre District Assembly. The case was investigated in its natural setting, and therefore provided the opportunity for the researchers to understand the respondents in this particular situation.

The purposive sampling technique was used to select the subjects of the study. Purposive sampling helps to select individuals who could provide information to unravel the factors influencing knowledge sharing among employees. The participants were selected from all departments of the Assembly and higher-level management, middle management and lower level employees. The sample for the study comprised 23 (19 percent) of the 121 employees of the Assembly. This is justified because some studies have used smaller samples in qualitative research with similar population size (Omar, 1997; Doherty, 2000; Sen, 2006). Table 1 shows the profile of respondents.

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide. This was used because of its flexibility. The researchers themselves conducted the interviews after permission had been obtained from the District Chief Executive. The interviews were conducted in from 2nd to 28th September 2013. Each interview took a minimum of 30 minutes. The interviews were

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

| Department/Position in organization | Gender | Qualification | Work Experience (in years) |
|-------------------------------------|--------|---------------|----------------------------|
| Accountant | Male | BSc | 4 |
| Assistant Budget Analyst | Male | BA | 1 |
| Assistant Director II ^A | Male | BA | 6 |
| Assistant Director II ^B | Male | BA | 1 |
| Assistant Director II ^B | Female | BSc | 11 |
| Assistant Human Resource Manager | Female | BA | 1 |
| Coordinating Director | Female | EMBA | 25 |
| Deputy Planning Officer | Female | BA | 6 |
| District Works Engineer | Male | BSc | 15 |
| Executive Officer | Male | WASSCE | 3 |
| Executive Officer | Male | SSSCE | 5 |
| Executive Officer | Female | SSSCE | 2 |
| Executive Officer | Female | SSSCE | 1 |
| Executive Officer | Female | SSSCE | 3 |
| Executive Officer | Female | SSSCE | 3 |
| Internal Auditor | Male | BSC, ICA(GH) | 4 |
| IT Officer | Male | BA | 5 |
| MIS Director | Male | BA | 5 |
| Personnel Officer | Male | MBA | 2 |
| Principal Planning Officer | Male | MSc | 15 |
| Senior Executive Officer | Male | BA | 5 |
| Stenographer Grade I | Female | BMS | 5 |
| Town and Country planning Director | Male | MSc | 5 |

Source: Authors' interview transcript.

recorded and later transcribed. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis technique. This enabled us identify themes that emerged from all the responses.

Data presentation and analysis

In this part of the study, we present the themes that emerged from the interviews. In all, seven themes emerged as factors influencing knowledge sharing among the participants and are presented below.

Trust in colleagues

Evidence of being trustworthy on the part of workers in the organization was perceived by the participants

to be a factor in knowledge sharing. One comment made by a female employee illustrated this point:

“I would not share my knowledge with a co-worker whom I don't trust”.

It was observed that integrity must be shown before knowledge can be shared between colleagues; that is, knowledge shared for reciprocation reasons (Kankanhalli et al., 2005). Another participant opined:

“I look in for honesty and readiness to share back knowledge on the part of colleagues before I share my knowledge”.

Prior researches suggest that perceived trust and care from other organization members positively influence knowledge sharing (Friesl et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2005; Renzl et al., 2005; von Krogh, 1998). The impression from the interviews supported this claim that trust in colleagues must be shown before sharing knowledge. Therefore, trust is critical in knowledge sharing. Trust can be created through regular interaction among employees, or can also be shaped between people who do not communicate on regular basis.

Respect and care

Organizational ethics related to respect for each other are an important factor that impacts on knowledge sharing. Courtesy towards fellow employees and paying individual attention are necessary for knowledge sharing. It was pointed out repeatedly during the interviews that respect for colleagues facilitates knowledge sharing:

“When I am undermined, I will never share my knowledge”.

One interviewee illustrated this by saying:

“We should be treated equally other than that, I will never share my knowledge!”

One participant noted that tolerance from a boss or colleagues will induce him to share his knowledge:

“There needs to be tolerance in the working place before knowledge sharing can be facilitated”.

Another participant expressed this in these words:

“... Lack of humility and the show off of all-knowing abilities would put me off from sharing my knowledge”.

Influenced by the values of love and belongingness, public sector workers want to be valued and cared for before they can be motivated to share knowledge. One participant exemplified this by echoing:

“How can I share my knowledge in an organization that I am looked down upon? Nobody wants to know what is happening to me; whether I come to work or not nobody cares. Nobody wants to listen to me and hear my problems”.

Level of experience of co-workers

The interview results indicated lack of experience of co-workers to be a reason for knowledge sharing. It was observed that the participants share their knowledge with inexperienced employees to assist them to perform their duties efficiently and effectively. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

“When I realize that a co-worker is struggling with a task and needs my help, I would share my knowledge with him/her”

“I will share my knowledge with a co-worker who needs my assistance on a job at hand”.

One participant noted that he would share his knowledge with new entrants, who presumably have limited working experience and may need guidance and coaching in the performance of their duties. This is illustrated with this quote:

“Based on my work experience, I would like to share my knowledge with my co-worker especially under the circumstance that the person is newly recruited”.

Organizational success

There were indications that respondents considered that the entire organization is a team, and that knowledge sharing builds effective teams. This is illustrated in this quote:

“The entire organization works together towards a common goal; this can be achieved when knowledge is shared among workers. It builds effective teamwork”.

The participants explained that they look at the general good of the organization before sharing knowledge. Teamwork is always the best in organizations; therefore, knowledge sharing should be geared towards the ultimate good of the organization. One participant noted the importance of group success,

as compared to individual success, in that individual success is embedded in group success:

“I believe group success is more important than individual because it’s only when the group succeeds that the individual succeeds as well. Therefore I share my knowledge for the collective good of the organization”.

Other participants noted that the output of a team normally far outweighs that of an individual:

“A team can achieve more result than an individual. I therefore share my knowledge to achieve more in a group”.

It was noted that hoarding knowledge is a selfish act and impedes the organization’s success:

“We are all in for the progress of the organization, so I will not be selfish to prevent the organization from progressing because of personal reasons or selfish gain”.

Concerns about colleagues’ performance were deemed important for the organization:

“I will share my knowledge with a co-worker who needs my assistance on a job at hand”.

“A co-worker’s inefficiency may affect my performance in the organization”.

“My desire to contribute my quota to the achievement of a collective goal of the organization will never be compromised”.

One participant stated that she would share her knowledge if she realized that the shared knowledge would have a positive effect on the organization. She illustrated this in these words:

“I would share my knowledge collectively if it will help promote the growth of the organization”.

The views expressed by participants emphasized that public service workers’ drive to share knowledge is ignited by the desire to achieve organizational goals, as public service workers look at the general good in sharing knowledge. This in effect supports the assertion by Friesl et al. (2011) that team-based structures and horizontal coordination result in higher knowledge sharing among public service workers that perceive the organization as a team. Setting and communicating organizational performance targets is key to achieving this purpose.

Level of education and understanding

The educational level and ability to comprehend issues on the part of co-workers also emerged from the interviews as things that are looked for in sharing knowledge. It was observed that co-workers’ abilities to comprehend routine tasks influence others’ decisions to share knowledge. One participant illustrated this in these words:

“I will share my knowledge when I see that my co-worker has the acumen and ability to appreciate the shared knowledge; majority of them don’t have the mental faculty to understand what I do”.

Another participant stated:

“The person should be the type who has the educational background to contribute to whatever we are discussing”.

Motivation

Studies of the role of motivation in knowledge sharing have produced mixed findings. Consistent with the extant literature (Liao, 2008; Kim and Lee, 2006) we found that motivation drives some individuals to share knowledge:

“Individual reward based on performance is very important because it motivates me to work hard and it affects my decision to share knowledge” one participant opined.

In this case, motivation was perceived as a pre-requisite for knowledge sharing in the organization:

“There should be motivation before a person would share his knowledge that makes him superior to his colleagues”.

Informal association

A few participants noted they only share knowledge with friends in the organization. They explained that they get along well with their friends and trust them to be faithful for their relationship’s sake; they defend one another when the need arises and therefore there is a need to share knowledge with each other:

“I share knowledge only with my friends because they would defend me and my interest”.

This study is consistent with the assertions by Brewer (1995) and Friesl et al. (2011) that informal association within an organization can influence knowledge sharing; as is evident in this study, some

employees are reluctant to share their knowledge with workers who are not their friends. Formation of informal groups and associations within the organization becomes essential here, as it has the potential to facilitate knowledge sharing. During their meetings they may learn from each other and share work-related ideas. Informal associations may foster trust building and instill confidence in employees.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has contributed to knowledge by identifying a number of key determinants of knowledge sharing in a public sector organization in the Ghanaian context. The study found mutual trust, respect and care for one another, the quest for organizational success, and the educational level and experience of co-workers to be significant factors influencing knowledge sharing in the Afigya Kwabre District Assembly.

It was evident from the study that public sector workers would hoard their knowledge when they are undermined and disregarded. Public sector workers want to be valued and be shown recognition before they will share their knowledge. Employees' opinions and suggestions should be welcomed and evaluated on their merits. In this case, undermining employees' capabilities and ideas would be a recipe for knowledge hoarding.

The quest for organizational success was also found to have an impact on knowledge sharing. It was also concluded from the interviews that mutual trust and care play an important role in sharing knowledge, as the participants were willing to share with co-workers who are honest and ready to share back. Encouraging social interaction will foster mutual trust among employees.

It was found that the education level of co-workers may either promote or impede knowledge sharing. While some workers would share knowledge with colleagues who have the educational acumen to share in return, others look at whether the person with whom knowledge is being shared has the requisite education or understanding to appreciate or comprehend it. It was observed that some participants share their knowledge with inexperienced recruits; therefore, assigning new recruits to experienced employees can facilitate knowledge sharing.

Respect for one another should be part of the core values and management of public sector organizations. Management should make sure that everyone's opinion matters in decision-making and problem solving. This would make public workers feel that they are valued and encourage them to share their knowledge. When employees work in teams, they are able

to engage in dialogue to make the necessary contribution to knowledge to solve problems.

The study has provided some useful exploratory insights into the significant factors influencing knowledge sharing in public sector organizations, but further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the role information technology plays in knowledge sharing in public sector organizations in Ghana, as the study could not establish its effect on knowledge sharing as noted in the literature review (Riege, 2005; Van den Brink 2003). Future studies could also include a comparative study of knowledge sharing behavior in private organizations and public institutions.

Appendix

Interview guide

1. How many years have you worked in public office?
2. Can you please tell me your position in public office?
3. What is your highest qualification?
4. What will make you share what you know with your co-workers? / Under what circumstance would you share your knowledge? Explain.
5. What do you look in for in your co-worker before you share your knowledge with him or her? Explain.
6. What will prevent you from sharing what you know to your co-worker? Explain.
7. What will affect your decision to share knowledge with your boss or colleagues?

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