

The impact of language diversity on knowledge sharing

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There is no doubt that organizations are very important social institutions that play a critical role in the development of society. However, the extent of their contribution depends largely on their own success. In today's competitive world, becoming a successful organization is extremely difficult. What drives organizational success? One can point to a number of factors some of which of critical value and others marginal. Financial and physical resources are important. Nevertheless, it is the workforce and the knowledge it possesses that that matters the most (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005; Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2009). One of the most important organizational activities is collaboration between employees. Organizational employees continuously engage with their colleagues to acquire task related information, advice, new insights and expertise to find solutions to their complex problems and develop innovative ideas (Ahmad & Widén, 2015; Widén-Wulff, 2007). This phenomenon is known

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as knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing enhances employees' productive capacity as employees utilize each other's knowledge, which ultimately reflects in organizational performance.

Recently, we see a rise in language diversity in almost all spheres of life and organizations are no exception (Barner-Rasmussen, Ehrnrooth, Koveshnikov, & Mäkelä, 2014; Driver & Wall, 2007; Josey & Abdullahi, 2002; Savolainen, 2016). The increase in language diversity in organizations is a product of globalization. International business operations and immigration have played an important role in the development of language diversity in the organizational workforce. Today, it is quite common that a multinational's employees communicate with linguistically diverse colleagues on daily basis. In response to rising multilingualism among employees, many organizations have adopted a common corporate language (usually English) (Mäkelä, 2006).

Knowledge sharing is a language-based activity (Ahmad, 2017). Since it is through language that individuals share knowledge, language diversity and consequently the adoption of a common corporate language means that many employees have to engage daily in knowledge sharing in a language of which they are not native speakers. This is a matter of concern because the proficiency, comfort and expressional confidence that people enjoy in their native language are usually far superior to that they have in a different language. It poses the question that whether knowledge sharing that is a relation based and communication intensive activity is influenced by language diversity among employees. This question is addressed in this study. The main objective was to investigate the effect of language on interpersonal knowledge sharing that is knowledge sharing between individuals.

Methodology

To answer the research question, quantitative and qualitative investigations were conducted in a large Finnish multinational company with operations in more than 70 countries around the world. The organization has approximately 18,000 employees working in more than 200 locations. The headquarters of the organization are in Helsinki. The organization is known as a major player in the marine and energy industry. It develops different kinds of high-tech products such as turbines and power engines.

One of the major requirements of this study was to collect empirical data from an organization with a linguistically diverse workforce. This Finnish multinational fulfills this requirement. Language diversity is common in this organization. A network of subsidiaries operating in different countries has

made internal expatriation and international recruitment common practices in the organization. Even its local subsidiaries have employees with linguistically diverse backgrounds. Around 40 percent of the employees in the organization's head office in Helsinki are non-Finnish speakers. Due to the high-tech nature of its products and services, most of the organization's work is done in team projects. The composition of teams is not border-dependent; instead, most of the teams are composed of employees who have diverse backgrounds and work in different locations. In short, it was typical and ideal multilingual organization for the purpose of this study.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. A questionnaire was distributed through the organization's intranet. Overall, 403 complete usable responses were received. Moreover, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted. Interviewees were from different subsidiaries of the organization, namely Germany, Finland, Norway, Italy, Kenya, UAE, Puerto Rico and Panama. All interviewees were from low and middle management working in different departments such as marketing, communication, product development and procurement. Survey data were analyzed using regression analysis. Interviews that formed a case study were analyzed with an inductive approach (Yin, 2014).

Findings

Language diversity in an organization means the existence of many languages in the company. Different languages have varying status in the company. A number of factors can determine the value of a language in a company. For example, the native language of company's top management or headquarter country makes that language valued. Why, because speaking that language will make it easier to network and connect with people in the top management and hence allows you access to the critical information. In this study, I found that employees who can speak a valued language in the company engage in knowledge sharing mostly among themselves. They share less knowledge with linguistically diverse individuals as compared to those who speak a low valued language in the company. As proficiency in a valued language provides access to important knowledge sources, knowledge networking with those who do not speak that language becomes less important. This finding shows that one's proficiency in a company's powerful language can influence how he/she values knowledge sources and, consequently, his/her knowledge-sharing behavior.

Another interesting and novel find was that those employees who regularly engage in knowledge sharing with linguistically diverse colleagues perform better than those who share knowledge with linguistically similar colleagues. A

famous linguist Edward Sapir proposes that people think differently in different languages. It means language diversity introduces cognitive diversity, employees with multilingual personal knowledge networks have access to a diverse set of approaches to problems solving and task accomplishment, which consequently results in high-quality decisions and ultimately improved performance.

The third important finding is about knowledge sharing interactions conducted in a nonnative language. The interview data showed that employees experience mainly two kinds of challenges when they share knowledge in a non-native language (English). First, they experience a high level of ambiguity; they find themselves unsure whether the problem in knowledge sharing process is due to their colleagues' lack of topical knowledge or of language proficiency. As a result, they struggle to decide whether they should make adjustments in knowledge content or in language sophistication level. Second, knowledge sharing in a non-native language is seen as a costly activity. Knowledge sharing in a non-native language is prone to misunderstandings and leads to costs not only in terms of money but also in terms of time. Misunderstandings require clarifications and further actions by knowledge-sharing participants. As a result, knowledge sharing in a non-native language becomes a drag on their daily activities.

How employees deal with such challenges and what kind of strategies they adopt to ensure smooth knowledge sharing in a non-native language were also discussed. It was found that employees make changes in their language, discourse and communication media so that knowledge sharing can be successful. There is clearly a difference between knowledge sharing in a native and non-native language. Analysis show that knowledge sharing between linguistically diverse employees involves dual translation. First is the contextualization translation that requires knowledge modification according to the recipient's context. This kind of translation happens in all types of knowledge-sharing interactions regardless of language differences and has been discussed in previous research. This study shows that there is another kind of translation on top of contextualization translation, which is inter-lingual translation. This translation involves making changes in one's ways of speaking to accommodate language differences between knowledge sharing participants. For example, knowledge-sharing participants ask confirmatory questions, change communication media, try to be extra polite and even repeat their points and arguments in multiple languages to ensure that the message gets through. These different kinds of language accommodation strategies can be seen as translation activities that knowledge-sharing participants perform during interlingual translation to deal with the extra layer of ambiguity added by the use of a non-native language.

Moreover, change in the interaction style to accommodate language differ-

ences hints that language differences can lead to innovative ways of knowledge sharing and can develop a sense of sensitivity to talk during knowledge-sharing interaction. Such sensitivity and heightened awareness of linguistic differences can significantly enhance the quality of knowledge sharing interactions. Hence, language diversity that usually is thought as a problem for knowledge sharing can actually improve the quality of knowledge sharing.

Contributions

Findings from this study have some practical implications. Organizations should try to educate their employees. They should attempt to increase awareness of common linguistic practices to motivate employees to reflect on their language behavior and its consequences for social interaction in general and for knowledge sharing in particular. Linguistic behavior operates at the subconscious level; it may seem natural and its consequences for knowledge sharing could not be readily evident. Therefore, it is important that organizations increase their employees' awareness of language diversity and clearly communicate problems and benefits associated with it.

Organizations should also identify knowledge-sharing patterns between different language communities and any discrepancies therein. This information could be used for more finely targeted interventions. For example, if an organization identifies language based grouping, it should trigger networking opportunities between extremely disconnected language communities if the disconnection is not in the company's interest. However, organizations could use language based grouping for projects that require speed and efficiency because, for this purpose, linguistic similarity and already established connections would positively affect task achievement.

Beyond organizational context, findings of this study also provide useful insights into our day-to-day information behavior. It shows how our language competency and being monolingual or multilingual can influence our information sources and information diversity.

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