

The Psychology of Blogging Communities: Social Identities and Knowledge Transfer Across Work-Groups

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Abstract

In this article, we propose that blog communities can enhance knowledge transfer in organization. They do so by shaping bloggers' group (subordinate) and organizational (superordinate) identities, which affect knowledge sharing between members of different work-groups in an organization. Building on existing research on psychological identity and on knowledge transfer, we make the case for the benefits of integrating these two research streams; more important, we identify blogging communities as factors in shaping individuals' identities and potentially facilitating knowledge transfer within organizations.

Introduction

Organizations are increasingly structured as multi-unit forms, providing them the flexibility to participate in a competitive global business environment. Work-groups may take the form of departments or project teams, and lateral movement between these groups will likely occur. Such moves or re-assignments provide opportunities for knowledge sharing and integration across units; thus, it is important to know what factors influence their success. One such measure of success is knowledge transfer between work-groups via reassigned unit members.

An individual's identity or psychological sense of self is one factor that may moderate the success of lateral moves. In part this is because people derive their identity from their membership in organizations and work-groups (Hogg and Terry 2000). In a multi-unit organization like IBM, for example, individuals may view themselves as "IBM-ers," (organization) or as "applications specialists," (work-group) or even as "George's Java guy," (technical area) reflecting different identities. Identifying with a work-group (or technical specialty) rather than with the broader organization, influence organizational processes, such as knowledge transfer between work-groups (Kane et al. 2005). In this article, we propose that intra-organization blogging communities encourage different types of identification (work-group, technical specialty, or

organization), which may have significant (and sometimes unintended) consequences -- most notably helping or hindering cross-group knowledge integration and work-group collaboration. Thus, leaders of organizations who create or support such internal communities need to understand the psychology of blogging communities. They need to understand the structure of blogging communities and the identities they create, and the effects on knowledge transfer in their organizations.

Our focus is on blogging communities internal to organizations. Many companies have active internal corporate blogging communities (e.g., IBM), often targeted at enhancing communication and group work among geographically distributed employees. We examine how the structure of these communities affects the development of individuals' identities. Specifically, we compare three different types of internal corporate blog communities: (a) organization-wide blogs, (b) individual work-group blogs, and (c) a combination of the two (i.e., choice of organization or work-group blog). Grounded in existing research, we offer propositions for future research about the relationship between the structure of internal corporate blog communities and individuals' social identity. As well, we examine the impact of these identities on knowledge transfer between groups following individuals' lateral movements between work-groups.

We argue that it is possible to create internal blogging communities that cultivate strong identification with both work-groups and with the larger organization, serving to help rather than hinder cross-group knowledge integration and collaboration.

Weblogs

Companies often encourage employees to blog for external audiences (e.g. customers) both to improve customer service and offer outsiders a glimpse at the inner-workings of the company (e.g. Microsoft). Easy and fast publication is one way blogs spread passion for work and help employees organize and share ideas – as they occur (Efimova and Grudin 2007). By blogging together with a shared focus (e.g. work-group or organization), individuals form a blog community. It is through their accessibility and

the processes of self-disclosure and information sharing that blog communities shape individuals' identity.

Identity and Blog Community Structure

A person's social identity is the "knowledge that he [she] belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him [her] of this group membership" (Hogg and Terry 2000). Within an organization, group membership can lead to the creation of an ingroup identity (e.g., the group a person identifies with, such as the finance department for an accountant). Others, outside of their ingroup are considered to be part of the outgroup (e.g. human resources, marketing). Research has demonstrated a differential treatment between the ingroup and the outgroup, referred to as an intergroup bias (Hewstone et al. 2002).

Blog community structure shapes an individual's identity. An organization wide blog community facilitates interpersonal interactions, an antecedent for organizational identity (Ashforth and Mael 1989). In addition, because of its large audience, individuals will be more comfortable sharing work related information over personal information. Therefore, an organization wide blog community will lead to a more inclusive organization identity, in comparison to a work-group blog community.

A specific work-group blog community will change the type of communication, as users will be more comfortable sharing social and personal information with a smaller audience. It is suggested, that the greater sharing of personal information and self-disclosure will lead to a less inclusive work-group identity.

Conflict arises when users are presented with a choice of participating in either of the two structures highlighted above. It is suggested that users will participate in the less inclusive over the more inclusive blog community, as a result of groups needing to be distinct in order to be maintained - optimal distinctiveness theory (Hewstone et al. 2002). In other words, users may be overwhelmed with the inclusivity of the organization identity created from the organization wide blog community and choose to participate in the less inclusive work-group blog community.

Knowledge and Blog Community Structure

The creation, storage, and distribution of knowledge are essential characteristics of an effective organization., Just because knowledge resides in one area of the organization, does not mean that is accessible or being shared by other areas (Szulanski 2000). Knowledge transfer is the process by which one unit of an organization is influenced by the experiences of another unit (Szulanski, 2000). Through their ability to influence identity, blog communities are also able to influence the effectiveness of knowledge transfer within organizations.

Previous research has demonstrated (Kane et al. 2005) through the learning of a task and subsequent group member rotation, that sharing an organization (superordinate) identity increases the likelihood of integration of new group member information. In addition, sharing an organization (superordinate) identity may result in an increased likelihood of reassigned group members maintaining connections after reassignment. The organization stands to benefit, as new knowledge is provided to group members through continued communication. A blog community provides a mechanism for this to occur, allowing the user to participate through posts and comments. Finally, research has shown the bias towards members of one's ingroup can result in greater cooperation and collaboration of ingroup members (Hewstone et al. 2002). Therefore, sharing an organization (superordinate) identity between two groups will increase the likelihood of collaboration across groups.

Conclusion

Social identity theory helps to explain how blogging communities act as mechanisms to influence the inclusivity of identity with either one's work-group or organization, which then influences knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing. An empirical test of this proposition is currently underway. We encourage leaders of large multi-unit organizations to consider maintaining internal blog communities to enhance employee identification and facilitate knowledge transfer in their organizations.

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