The Role of Motivation, Ability, and Opportunity in Achieving Effective Knowledge-Work:
Knowledge Work and MAO

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to empirically test the impact of the Motivation-Ability-Opportunity- (MAO) model on knowledge work. We propose that knowledge work is a function of employees' motivation, ability and opportunity. In this regard, the aim is to provide empirical support to explain the effects of motivation, ability and opportunity on knowledge-work, which we defined as a knowledge-centered behavior. Data was collected through a self-report questionnaire. A sample size of 350 employees of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad answered the questionnaire. Structural equation modeling techniques and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted on hypothesis testing. The findings confirm that motivation, ability and opportunity independently influence knowledge-work behavior. Also, results revealed that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation has significant influence on knowledge work; however intrinsic motivation has a higher effect than extrinsic motivation.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge Management, Knowledge Work, Knowledge Worker, Motivation, Ability, Opportunity

INTRODUCTION

Scholars are increasingly highlighting the role of knowledge management (KM) in achieving better decision making and problem solving (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Hoq & Akter, 2012). The most prominent literature on KM has viewed it as an organizational initiative - emphasizing the importance of organizational factors that influence KM effectiveness. KM is a system that aims to improve organizational effectiveness (Jennex, Smolnik & Croasdell, 2009). From this perspective, KM success within firms is a function of technological, organizational and environmental factors; including strategy, leadership/management support, knowledge content, processes, technology and structure (e.g. Yew Wong, 2005; Jennex & Olfman, 2005; Jennex, et al., 2009; 2012; Basu & Sengupta, 2007; Lin, 2014; Sedighi, van Splunter, Zand & Brazier, 2015).

That said the literature has focused less on the role of individual employees in the KM discourse (Muhammed, Doll & Deng, 2009; Hoq & Akter, 2012). Scholars focusing on the Human Resources perspective of KM have argued that the human capital has the most potential to serve as a source of competitive advantage (Jiang, Lepak, Hu & Baer, 2012). Employees are supposed to be able to identify and solve difficult and complex problems, counting on their abilities, imagination, creativity

and high-level of education (Rao, 2010). Employees – knowledge workers – are the ones who are engaged in knowledge-work activities, and within them resides KM success (Hoq & Akter, 2012). From this perspective, other factors in the KM system are viewed as merely enablers to KM success.

Traditionally KM focused on explicit knowledge (knowledge-codification) and organizational knowledge. Linking the individual-knowledge perspective to organizational success suggests a shift from traditional KM to personal KM (PKM) – focusing on individual and tacit knowledge (Cheong & Tsui, 2011; Muhammed et al., 2009). Knowledge workers add value to organizations due their tacit-knowledge and their ability to transfer it into work activities (Davis, 2002; Mládková, 2012). They depend on their personal-knowledge more than the organizational-knowledge in work activities (El-Farr, 2009). Due to the intangibility of tacit-knowledge, knowledge workers are difficult to manage, yet utilizing appropriate practices to enable them provides organizations with a unique competitive advantage (Mládková, 2012).

How to manage, improve and measure knowledge-work became central in the literature - arguing that effective knowledge-work activities such as knowledge creation, sharing and application are core goals for effective KM systems (Timonen & Paloheimo, 2011; Palvalin, Vuolle, Jääskeläinen, Laihonen, & Lönnqvist, 2015). That said, effective knowledge-work is mostly dependent on the performance of individual knowledge workers who drive the success of knowledge-intensive organizations (Drucker, 1998; Rao, 2006).

A typology of knowledge worker definitions, roles and knowledge-work actions could be deduced from the literature. Knowledge-work often is defined as a discretionary behavior and a system of activities that knowledge workers opt to do. Thus, knowledge workers are viewed as volunteers, investors, valuable resource, self-directed learners and individual innovators and performers (Muhammed et al., 2009; Efimova, 2004; Kelloway & Barling, 2000; Drucker, 1998; Davenport, 2010; Ho, 2008). Therefore, managing knowledge-work should be mostly focusing on establishing conditions that increase the likelihood of knowledge workers to make the "right" choices. Knowledge workers make voluntary choices of when, how much and where to invest their knowledge and energy at work (Efimova, 2004). They are likely to engage in knowledge -work to the extent that they have the motivation, ability and opportunity to do so (Kelloway & Barling, 2000).

More recently, researchers have drawn upon the motivation- ability- opportunity (MAO) model of HRM and suggest that employee performance is a function of those three essential components (Hutchinson, 2013; Jiang et al., 2012; Okorogu, 2015). The MAO framework has successfully explained how and why motivation, ability and opportunity affect a wide range of organizational behaviors, among those are knowledge-work behaviors (Argote, McEvily & Reagans, 2003).

Moreover, Wright (2005) noted that individual workers apply knowledge processes to support their day-to-day work activities – broadly characterized as problem solving and learning practices. Especially, as highest centers of learning, universities need to build information infrastructure and create a favorable atmosphere where teaching and non-teaching staff can take part in various KM activities. Most university employees could be considered as knowledge workers; they are expected to have major roles in formulating the strategies and processes of modern universities. Moreover, university employees have an active role in changing universities' organizational cultures and individual behaviors relative to knowledge-work (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Hoq & Akter, 2012).

Overall, while there is an increasing attention paid to organizational factors of KM success, there has been relatively little discussion about the role of the individual employee in KM success. Focusing on the personal-knowledge perspective in KM success has a lot of potential in the KM literature. In that respect, Muhammed et al. (2009) pointed that KM success depends upon the KM practices used by individuals. DW Rechberg and Syed (2014) highlighted the need for individuals' participation as

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