

Why personal reputation matters in virtual knowledge sharing

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to provide an argument for implementing a reputation system into virtual knowledge sharing programs.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The author formulates opinions based on workplace realities, professional insights and personal experience.*

Findings – *To help knowledge workers be more generous with their insights and information in a virtual knowledge sharing platform, personal reputation must be examined, assessed, and leveraged as part of the intrinsic value of the program.*

Practical implications – *Several practical implications emerge in this article: knowledge sharing should be virtual; it should occur outside of functional boundaries; systems should include reputation assessments; power should be in the hands of the individual participants; and no monetary incentive should be given to participate.*

Originality/value – *The ideas and methods for implementing a reputation system are new. Readers will discover the latest trend emerging in the area of virtual knowledge sharing and collaborative learning.*

Keywords *Knowledge management, Computer software, Virtual learning environment, Reputation, Knowledge sharing*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Introduction

How many of the people that you work with today do you actually see face to face? How many of them are only a voice on the phone or a name in an email? How many of them have you never met, but are colleagues with whom you collaborate on a daily basis?

In today's world, it's the new norm for coworkers to be physically distant from one another. If you have an Internet connection and a computer, smart phone or a tablet, you can log on and link up with the office from just about anywhere.

Innovation has made the office obsolete; yet, this same innovation has given rise to a new generation of knowledge workers whose best asset lies in the information in their brains. Getting people to connect and share this knowledge can be a challenge when they do not know one another, never see one another, and may not understand how they can help or benefit from one another.

The challenge today is showing people the value of sharing critical and personal knowledge with colleagues across an entire enterprise, providing them with a way to easily connect with one another around the world in order to share this knowledge, and helping them take an active role in building their knowledge sharing reputation virtually.

“The challenge today is showing people the value of sharing critical and personal knowledge with colleagues across an entire enterprise.”

Generosity trumps hoarding

People hoard knowledge. It is not a new phenomenon and it is not likely to go away. But what is new is the growing ranks of knowledge workers in today's companies. In decades past, companies felt minimal impact from people hoarding knowledge because they were still able to innovate and move the company forward, in large part due to the slower pace of change occurring in the world.

The same cannot be said for the work environment today. The skills and know-how of today's knowledge workers grow obsolete quickly, within 12 to 18 months in many situations. The rate of change is exceedingly fast and people need to keep pace with new knowledge and insights in order to do their jobs and help the company stay relevant. When knowledge workers hoard their most precious asset, they stifle the company's ability to innovate and remain competitive.

What is needed today is a shift toward more generosity with knowledge. Openly sharing insights and understandings can create a more connected and responsive organization. Today's workforce needs access to a wide range of knowledge sources, in part because jobs tend to flow over boundaries and breach the walls of numerous functions. The varied experiences of others who work for the same organization but are from outside a knowledge seeker's specific job function can help that person gain a deeper understanding of the situation or issue they are facing.

In addition, the rising ranks of younger workers have grown up sharing copious amounts of information with people virtually, and they expect this same freedom and flexibility to be available to them at work. They want to gather bits of knowledge from colleagues around the company as needed, and share their own knowledge when they can. Reciprocity is key here, and they want to know that people are taking and giving. They also do not have (nor likely want) middle managers brokering introductions for them in their quest for knowledge sources. With many layers of bureaucracy gone these days, people need to be their own knowledge brokers and find their own sources. As a result, organizations have to provide them with easy ways to connect with one another around the entire company in order to share knowledge.

To help encourage people to share their own personal knowledge, insights, understandings, hunches, suspicions, theories, and the like, people need to feel valued. They have to believe that their time and precious commodity (i.e. their information) is worth something. Organizations can accomplish this by implementing a recognition system that explicitly validates the unique strengths that each contributor brings to the company.

Building reputation

Asking people to share their personal insights can cause some unease. They aren't being asked to simply share a document that their department uses, to which they do not feel any personal responsibility. They are being asked to share information that they gained through their own authentic experiences, which is something much more personal and much more valuable. They could be asked:

- What was the key to your success?
- How did you get this to work?

- Did this work well?
- What failed?
- What could be done better in the future?

These types of genuine reflections and this degree of openness require a certain level of trust between the parties interacting, along with a bit of vulnerability on the part of the person sharing information. No one wants to share something personal, like their thoughts on why a project failed, only to have it brought up negatively in a different situation. This is why people will typically share what is common or what is already known, but will hold back on what is a personal level of insight. Yet, these personal insights are exactly what people need to share in order to achieve effective growth and development.

Understandably, before even considering sharing this type of information, people want to know what the receiver is going to do with it.

- Will they share it with others appropriately?
- Will they hoard it?
- Will they use it and then claim it as their own?
- Will they give me credit for what I shared?
- Will they reciprocate and give information back to me?

In the end, it comes down to this: how can I trust them?

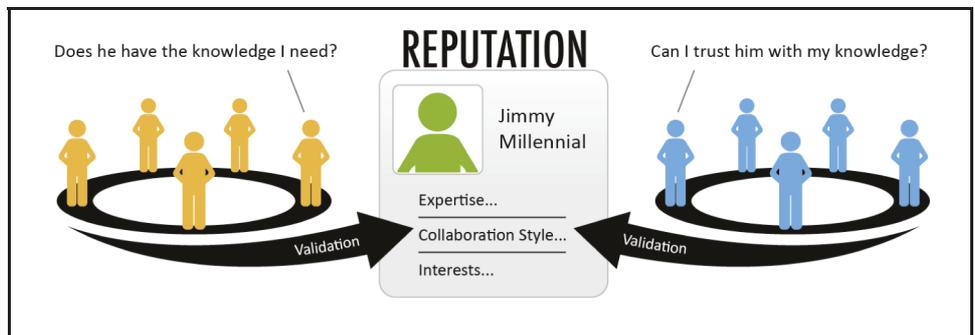
In a virtual work world where people may never truly meet, the key to building trust is bringing familiarity to the connections they make with one another. This can be achieved through a virtual reputation system that focuses on three critical factors: expertise, collaboration style and interests (see Figure 1). These three elements provide vital information that can help create a comprehensive reputation system that inspires and motivates the workforce to be more generous with their knowledge.

Profiling expertise: discovering what people know using a common spectrum

Learners and advisors who come together through a knowledge sharing system need to understand what experience, expertise, learning needs, and the like each person brings with them. To make this a standardized process that stays focused on organizational criteria, a common set of functional and leadership/management competencies should be used. For example, functional competencies could include aspects related to specific functional domains or disciplines (e.g. HR, IT, Marketing/Sales, Legal, Operations), while leadership and management competencies could include skill sets that are not domain specific but that can go across function (e.g. scenario planning, strategic thinking, visioning, time management, project planning).

Everyone in the system, regardless of their functional role, would see the same list of competencies and use this identical list in order to choose their own areas of aptitude or

Figure 1



“Today’s workforce needs access to a wide range of knowledge sources, in part because jobs tend to flow over boundaries and breach the walls of numerous functions.”

learning need. This is important so that a basis for commonality can be established across functions, departments, regions and the entire breadth of an organization. Using this common index of experiences, people from throughout a company can connect with one another in order to share critical knowledge. This can occur outside of barriers such as job level, function and location, helping to open up the knowledge vault within an organization and spread tacit know-how throughout the workforce. Once people understand what others in the company know or are seeking, they can then look into the next key element of reputation: understanding how they collaborate.

Collaboration style: understanding how people share what they know using positive descriptors

In a virtual knowledge sharing system, many participants will never meet in person. Figuring out how a stranger will collaborate can seem like a challenge, but the use of a reputation system can provide critical insights so that learners and advisors can make informed decisions about the people they choose to work with.

Using another set of common descriptors, collaboration style can be established by focusing on the positives and strengths that people offer. Adjectives such collaborative, inquisitive, pragmatic, innovative, or responsive could be used to describe how people have experienced that learner or advisor in the past. This provides a leading indicator on what others could expect from that person in the future. The emphasis on positive aspects helps eliminate negative comments that can create a permanent negative barrier that hinders knowledge flow. For example, if Jimmy Millennial receives a negative rating from a colleague he collaborated with in the past, he may be unintentionally flagged as *persona non grata* in the minds of other learners and advisors and could become a knowledge sharing pariah of sorts, someone who no longer has access to any knowledge from the crowd. This harms not only Jimmy and his ability to seek out and share information, but it also harms the organization because a roadblock to knowledge pathways forms. Instead, if someone does not think Jimmy is very responsive, they would simply not choose that aspect from a list options; they would focus on what strengths Jimmy does offer and allow those to shine through. Rather than building a community where negativity permeates the foundation, a positive-focused reputation system allows strengths to be highlighted and leveraged.

With a system such as this, people rate one another based on their experience from working together, giving others an idea of how individuals typically share knowledge, use insights, support colleagues, and the like. This would build up a person’s reputation and help set expectations for what others could expect if they choose to connect and share with that individual. People would be able to validate what others say about them, allowing knowledge workers to showcase their strongest attributes and the ones they want to build a reputation around. This will help colleagues find the right people who are good candidates to meet their learning needs, and help make solid connections to build deeper knowledge sharing throughout the organization.

Interests: identifying what others will do with shared knowledge

The last factor in a virtual reputation system is understanding what people will do with the knowledge they glean from colleagues. This element can be considered a virtual handshake of sorts. Advisors have to feel comfortable that learners will value the knowledge and experience shared with them and will use it to better the organization and the community.

Conversely, learners need to express their goals and objectives honestly so that advisors can understand what the learners are trying to accomplish and can provide them with relevant information.

Articulating interests through a reputation system helps people build a sense of familiarity and trust with one another. They know what information people seek, they comprehend how insights will be used, and they understand how individuals and the organization will benefit from this activity. The give and take in a knowledge sharing environment creates a reciprocal process where generosity with information feeds back into the development of coworkers, which in turn builds a stronger organization.

Putting it into practice

The creation of an effective knowledge sharing system where personal insights are expressed can be accomplished in any organization where people seek to both generously give of their know-how and use acquired information for the betterment of the crowd. Several key considerations should be addressed when implementing such a knowledge sharing system.

- *Make it virtual.* People work virtually. Giving them a system that supports how they inherently work is a critical factor for enterprise-wide knowledge sharing. It has to be simple and seamless, fitting naturally into their daily work habits.
- *Move beyond functional barriers.* Knowledge sharing today needs to be among peers across the breadth of an organization. Job duties and tasks often cross functional barriers and people can gain vital information from colleagues outside of their own functions. In addition, competition among coworkers in the same function may stifle knowledge sharing, whereas peers in other sections of the company could be more willing to reveal their insights.
- *Include a reputation system.* Letting people express their expertise, rate one another on positive aspects of their character, and define their interests and use for new knowledge is critical in building trust among colleagues. A reputation and validation system offers a concrete way for people to assess what can often feel like an intangible quality. This is particularly important in a virtual environment, where people may never meet.
- *Give power to individuals.* The responsibility for knowledge sharing should be in the hands of individuals themselves, not their managers or supervisors. This plays into the creation of a reputation system, and allows people to take the reputation they have locally and project it into a virtual space. How, when, and with/from whom they choose to share or seek knowledge is their choice and will be reflected in their online reputation. By empowering individuals, it creates a culture of generous knowledge sharing that is commonplace and expected, and that ultimately accomplishes organizational objectives on a large scale.
- *Keep it pure.* Do not create financial incentives for knowledge sharing. This can cause people to participate for all the wrong reasons. In order for individuals to truly be generous with their knowledge, they have to want to give it away. Offering monetary incentives for participation may garner great quantities of people into the system, but the quality of those contributors will likely be less than stellar.

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Further reading

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Randy Emelo, President and CEO of Triple Creek (www.3creek.com), has more than 25 years of experience in management, training and leadership development with military, profit and nonprofit organizations both nationally and internationally. His ability to anticipate the next trends in the world of knowledge transfer and mentoring has set him apart as a much sought-after thought leader. Open Mentoring® is Triple Creek's award-winning enterprise mentoring software that is used by people in more than 50 countries. Randy Emelo can be contacted at: remelo@3creek.com

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