

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract

Most of the knowledge sharing discussion has focused on the factors influencing and the role of knowledge sharing in organisational effectiveness and performance. The most common factors relate to an organisation's structure, infrastructure and practices (e.g. job design), individual employees (e.g. social networks) and types of knowledge (e.g. tacit). This paper is motivated by the assumption within the knowledge sharing literature that labour stability is essential to create and nurture the above knowledge sharing factors. Focusing on the individual factors and in particular the role of social networks in knowledge sharing, this paper aims to understand how properties emerging from social networks, referred to as people knowledge, can be perceived as a form of social capital that is developed in shorter timeframes and supports intra-organisational knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments. Dynamic labour environments in this research were hospitality businesses experiencing frequent changes in the composition of teams of employees. Indeed the social network literature suggests the need for labour stability for the emergence of social network properties such as social capital. This requirement of labour stability though may be challenged in some contexts and industries such as the hospitality industry of the Northern Territory of Australia. Qualitative data collection techniques were used to acquire data from seventy-six front-office employees of three hotels in Darwin. The findings suggest the emergence of social capital in dynamic labour environments and the important role of social capital in supporting collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Social networks, social capital, knowledge sharing, people knowledge, dynamic labour environments, hospitality, Northern Territory (NT).

Introduction

The importance of sharing knowledge is understood as a critical activity for businesses [9]. Many industries have been described as knowledge intensive because managing their knowledge is their main activity and can also be their product. One such industry is the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry is knowledge intensive as employees deliver experiences, which require the coordination and application of knowledge [2].

Confusion exists in the literature around the most appropriate definition of this process and suggestions range from knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer to knowledge flow [29]. Transfer is usually related to impact as through transfer of knowledge, the recipient is expected to apply and make an impact with the acquired knowledge. In juxtaposition, knowledge sharing refers only to the process of moving the knowledge resource from the owner to the recipient [22]. This research is

positioned in the latter perspective and addresses the two-way sharing of knowledge between hospitality employees.

The knowledge sharing literature has focused on the factors influencing and the role of knowledge sharing in organisational effectiveness and performance. Factors refer to conditions that concern an organisation or individual employees and have the potential to facilitate or inhibit knowledge sharing [13]. Both research areas have been studied and discussed from an inter- and intra-organisational perspective [20]. The literature suggests that various factors facilitate knowledge sharing. The most common factors relate to an organisation's structure, infrastructure and practices (e.g. job design), individual employees (e.g. social networks) and types of knowledge (e.g. tacit) [30]. This research focuses on the social networks of hospitality employees and how social networks influence intra-organisational knowledge sharing between employees. More specifically, this paper aims to unpack how social capital develops within employees' social networks in shorter timeframes and labour dynamic environments, and how it influences intra-organisational knowledge sharing between employees. Based on these conditions we refer to this emerging concept as 'people knowledge'. Dynamic labour environments in this research were hospitality businesses experiencing frequent changes in the composition of teams of employees. It is important to understand how social capital develops in dynamic labour environments because the social network literature suggests the need for labour stability for the emergence of social network properties such as social capital. Indeed recent literature has highlighted the need for more research to illuminate the processes and factors influencing the dynamic creation of social capital irrespective of social networks with ties of variable strengths [5]. This requirement of labour stability though may be challenged in some contexts and industries such as hospitality.

This paper provides an overview of the social networks and social capital research to provide the theoretical context to the empirical data collected from Darwin's hospitality industry, in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia. The analysis illustrates how the emergent properties of social relationships (e.g. people knowledge), referred to as social capital in this research context, helped employees collaborate and share knowledge. The paper concludes with implications for international business researchers and practitioners as well as limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Social networks influencing knowledge sharing

Social networks have been defined as 'a set of actors connected by a set of ties' [33, p.716]. For example, employees could relate to each other through trust or advice ties and consequently create trust or advice social networks, often referred to as social capital. Unfortunately networks are not fully depicted in formal organisational structures such as organisational hierarchies, and it is often those networks outside the organisational structures that significantly influence work processes and outputs [8]. Formal organisational structures present only the professional relationships of peers, but peers relate to each other in a multitude of interdependent ways in a work environment (e.g. professional, social). This gives employee networks both social and professional facets that cannot be ignored because their existence and interdependency can positively or negatively influence business performance [32].

The role of social networks has been studied in relation to turnover, motivation and knowledge management practices [29]. The important role of social networks can be explained through their potential to create social capital. The idea underpinning social capital is that it is centred on the value of 'social networks...as interaction and connections develop shared norms, trust and reciprocity that in turn foster cooperation to achieve common ends' [21, p. 321]. Defining social

capital can be challenging. Social capital can be defined 'by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure' [7, p. 98]. Putnam [27] described it as referring to the relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of interactions in a society and said that it is based on trust, reciprocity and social networks. Lin [24] described it as 'capital captured through social relations' (p.9). This research uses Nahapiet and Ghoshal's [26] definition of social capital as 'the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit' (p. 243). Indeed social capital is perceived to be the emergent value from social networks' structures and interdependencies [10] which critically influences activities such as collaboration and consequently knowledge sharing.

Similar to the variety of definitions for social capital the components, facets or characteristics of social capital have been conceptualised in many ways depending on the context social capital is applied to. For example, when social capital is considered from a community development perspective, it could be perceived as bonding, bridging and linking social capital [25]. In this research, social capital literature is drawn to understand why and how employees collaborate and consequently share knowledge because of their social networks. Indeed, the focus of social capital and its basis in networks and relationships has the potential to explain collaboration and consequently knowledge sharing. In a working environment, having an organisation with a substantial stock of social capital provides a better platform for working together than an organisation without a substantial stock of social capital [27].

This research uses Nahapiet and Ghoshal's [26] dimensions of social capital, namely: structural, relational and cognitive capital, as a framework. Their model depicts the relationships between social capital and intellectual capital, as measured by the knowledge and knowing capability of an organisation, and they 'see the roots of intellectual capital deeply embedded in social relations and in the structure of these relations.' [26, p.260]. They argue that differences in the performance of organisations are based on the strength of the relationship between these concepts.

Relational social capital focuses on the types of relationships people engage in through a history of interactions and their influence on behaviour [26]. The relational aspect of social capital is pertinent to this research but it is important to state that references to relational social capital make an implicit connection to the importance of labour stability to ensure relationships are created and fostered through a history of interactions [18]. It is assumed that in a stable labour environment, employees more frequently collaborate with their colleagues within the business for a sufficient length of time to enable the development of social networks and the emergence of properties that facilitate intra-organisational knowledge sharing [11]. Indeed, the presence of labour stability is perceived to be critical as it provides employees sufficient time to create durable networks with distinct structure and content that can yield social capital.

However, contemporary business environments are labour dynamic because employees tend to move from one job to another, carry out multiple tasks and collaborate with a plethora of employees. The hospitality industry is a typical example of a dynamic labour environment and in most cases can be perceived as an extreme case because labour changes tend to manifest more frequently and more extremely [34]. The most widely accepted factors triggering labour instability in the hospitality industry are staff turnover, labour mobility, and the nature of businesses [37]. Interestingly, some social capital literature suggests that variations in social capital are caused by various factors such as mobility and turnover [16]. Additionally relational social capital, which

proposes that small-scale interpersonal networks translate into large scale patterns of interaction which in turn feed back into smaller groups, provides a basis for demonstrating the strength of weak social ties within professional groups. Granovetter argues that mobility between professional specialities 'sets up elaborate structures of bridging weak ties between the more coherent clusters that constitute operative networks in particular locations' [14, p, 1373]. This pattern of interaction can occur, for example, as a result of meetings and conventions where networks are reformed supporting a sense of community through the maintenance of weak ties [14, 15].

Although recent literature states very little about the processes and/or mechanisms of developing social capital, especially in dynamic labour environments [5], recent empirical research has offered interesting findings strengthening the discussion around the need to study and understand how social capital develops in dynamic labour environments. For example, Bozkurt and Mohr [5] discussed how different forms of cross-border employee mobility contributed to establishing social ties across different strategic business units of multi-national enterprises. The study found that different forms of mobility promoted the creation of social ties in different ways and to different degrees which all contributed towards collaboration. On this basis, this research set out to understand whether labour instability in hospitality could trigger more changes in employee's social networks and in turn create more opportunities to create social capital that could in turn help employees collaborate and share knowledge with each other in a timely manner.

Methodology

This research paper argues that in dynamic labour environments, the study of the resources flowing through social networks can facilitate intra-organisational knowledge sharing and is part of a PhD research project based in a hotel chain in Darwin (the capital of the NT of Australia). Intra-organisational knowledge sharing was studied in relation to participant's perceptions of how they collaborate with their peers [17]. As such, exploring and understanding the perspectives and perceptions of employees are good ways to understand how intra-organisational knowledge sharing practices take place [28] and how their social networks help them in their work environment. As this research paper reports results from a completed PhD project with a focus other than social capital, social capital was not operationalised and measured. On the contrary, the acquired data were interpreted through the social capital literature. Nonetheless the use of qualitative studies with case study designs and the use of ethnographic data collection techniques (e.g. interviews) are perceived as appropriate for studying how social capital develops especially in dynamic labour environments [5].

Data collection was conducted over an eight-month period through semi-structured interviews and validated through two focus groups. The unit of analysis was the individual and care was taken to interview the same individuals during the eight months of data collection. A total of seventy-six employees were interviewed during the eight months of data collection. Only seven of those seventy-six employees had been interviewed monthly for the whole duration of the project. The length of the interviews varied between participants depending on the content of the information and the detail in describing and discussing this information. Interviews ranged between 20 to 60 minutes. At the beginning of data collection, participants were less talkative and less willing to disclose information. Three to four months into the project there were notable differences in their willingness to engage in conversation. This could be attributed to the systematic collection of data. Three or four months gave them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the process of interviewing and, most importantly, they were 'convinced' about the confidentiality clause.

The content of interviews was divided into three parts starting with non-research-related questions such as ‘how are you’ in order to relax the participant and build rapport. The second part of the interview focused primarily on participant’s collaboration with their colleagues in relation to the different types of labour changes (e.g. shifts, staff turnover, intra and inter hotel movements and handover). These questions were broad such as “What do you think of working with people you have just met?” The questions aimed to probe participants to identify and discuss the factors they perceived as important for their collaboration with peers. Additionally, participants were asked about the hotel chain’s structure, infrastructure and practices (e.g. orientation, training, organisational values, employee satisfaction surveys) to ascertain how their role in knowledge sharing was perceived. The third and final part of the interviews gave participants the opportunity to discuss anything additional they felt was important about the study or whether they needed any clarification or updates on the progress of the study. In cases of new participants, background information was obtained (for example, hospitality experience, motivations to work in hospitality and life in the Northern Territory). In addition, they were asked to comment on topics discussed with existing participants during the previous months of data collection. This questioning strategy with new participants was adopted to monitor their perception from the inception of their employment.

Data analysis took place between April and August 2009. The coding of the data was divided into phases involving descriptive, topic and analytical coding. The data was reviewed in a variety of ways such as looking at individual responses and group responses and how they developed over time or looking at the three hotels separately. Throughout this process, coding was used to group responses in themes. Cross-coding by the authors was undertaken to ensure the reliability, consistency and trustworthiness of the findings [12, 24]. Transferability was achieved through ‘thick description’ [34, p. 39] providing a detailed account of the research embedded in a specific context. Both the criteria of dependability and confirmability were met by providing a detailed account of the investigation. Authenticity of the data can be verified by examining the audio files and transcripts of interviews and field notes.

Research Context: A dynamic labour environment

Darwin is situated in the Northern Territory of Australia. It is considered a remote location that attracts a mobile workforce because of its characteristics. It has great employment opportunities because of high labour mobility as well as its being a great destination for people engaging in working holidays because of the combination of natural beauty and relatively low-skilled employment requirements to fund such travels. These characteristics explain why for the last thirty years, Darwin and the NT have experienced the highest rates of residential mobility of all Australian states and territories. High population turnover impacts all types of businesses but especially those in the hospitality industry. The 2006 Labour Mobility Survey reported that nearly 40 percent of all people employed in the accommodation sector stayed in their jobs for less than one year [1].

Hotel chain and participants profile

The front office departments from three hotels located in the city of Darwin were used. All three hotels targeted different tourist sectors, and differed in their star rating, brand, guests and employee capacity. The size of the hotels ranged from 76 to 101 employees and 183 to 235 rooms. Their business was generated by airline crews, corporate and local businesses, corporate meetings, leisure, wholesale, and oil and gas businesses.

During the course of this study four types of labour changes were experienced: staff turnover, inter- and intra-hotel movements, and shifts. Forty-three arrivals and 40 employee departures were recorded covering all five types of labour changes. The majority of the new staff was external to the hotel chain while 20 employees came from intra- or inter- hotel movements.

Seventy-six front office employees participated in this study. Most of the participants (59%) worked in an operational capacity (e.g. porter) while the rest (41%) held managerial appointments. The majority of operational staff were female (82%) aged between 18 and 25 years old (78%). Forty percent of operational staff had been in Darwin for less than six months, 42% for more than seven months and 18% were locals from Darwin. More than half of the participants (53%) had been employed by the hotel chain for less than six months. The majority (73%) of the employees were non-career-oriented. Non-career-oriented employees were travellers that engaged in hospitality work in Darwin as a working holiday. These individuals were highly travelled and accustomed to living and working with people they had not known for a long time. Finally, the majority were Australian (80%).

Conversely, more of the managerial staff were female (55%) and aged between 18 and 30 years old (56%). The majority had finished high school (58%) while the rest held undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. Sixty-one percent had been in Darwin for more than six months, and the majority (58%) had been employed by the hotel chain for more than six months. All employees were career-oriented. Career-oriented employees came to Darwin to fulfill their career progression aspirations. This group of employees had significant industry and travelling experience. This suggested they had been exposed to the challenges of collaborating with various peers as well as relocating and living in different destinations. Finally, most of the managerial staff were from overseas (65%) and were employed as duty managers (68%) on full time contracts (90%).

Results: Knowledge sharing among hospitality employees

Participants engaged with each other both professionally in their working environment as well as socially. Through these interactions, they developed trust and friendship relationships. Career-oriented employees considered people who had shared their perceptions and ideas with regards to their work as friends. They felt comfortable with each other, which provided them with the necessary knowledge to carry out their respective tasks, and they also collaborated with each other. This sense of understanding provided them with a platform to trust each other, to offer help and also to feel safe asking for help. Trust in this instance referred to professional trust. As demonstrated by the following vignette, professional trust was associated with having confidence in peers to carry out their work activities:

In a work sense I trust all of them to help me and do their job.

Non-career-oriented employees considered people they could socialise with and confide in as friends. They felt comfortable with colleagues they were able to communicate with and engage on a social or personal basis whilst at work. The following vignette highlights non-career-oriented employees' perception of friendships:

Friends are people that can understand where I am coming from. We are into the same stuff. If I tell them personal stuff they won't tell anyone.

For this group of employees, trust referred to personal trust. Personal trust was perceived as the ability to divulge personal information to a colleague that would not be passed on to others in the organisation. Non-career-oriented employees who were new to Darwin were removed from their support networks of friends and family and found themselves living in a place unknown to them and without an existing social network. For this group of people, relating to others helped them create friends with whom they socialised and spent time with whilst in Darwin. Friendships developed under conditions of necessity and personal aspiration, and served as support networks and platforms to fulfill personal goals. These friendships did not require employees to have worked with or be associated with each other for lengthy periods. Making friends and developing trust relationships made their stay more enjoyable and decreased their feelings of isolation because they were not from Darwin while enabling them to disclose personal or family related issues and debrief at work:

For us who have no family or friends here relying on each other is important. Our professional and social relationships with these people provide us with a support network because we are far away from home and are lonely. For example, if something happens your family can't be here in 5 minutes so if anything does happen you will turn to your friends and ask for advice. I am really lucky I have Billy and Nicola here and have constantly been asking them questions, asking each other about what we do and how do we cope with this or where to go for stuff when you don't have transport or where do you go to do this or that. So for anyone that is coming up here they should look out for themselves and look for that strong group of friends around them. It's a different environment. You have to embrace people because everybody is in the same boat. Everybody is lonely, everybody is in the middle of nowhere and they all go that extra mile to protect each other.

Through these friendship and trust relationships that emerged from working and socialising, both career and non-career-oriented employees developed a good professional and personal understanding of each other as summarised in Table 1. They came to know how their peers behaved, reacted or communicated. Participants referred to the outcome of their professional and personal understanding as people knowledge.

Table 1: People knowledge that facilitated knowledge sharing

Professional people knowledge	Personal people knowledge
How to communicate/approach people	Know people's personality
Know people's work style	Know people's personal life circumstances
Know people's capabilities (e.g. quality of work)	(e.g. family or residence)
Know who people are	
Know what people know	
Know where to find people	
Know what people do	

Professional and personal people knowledge helped them collaborate, despite not knowing each other or not having worked with colleagues for a long time. For individuals, personal people knowledge was not perceived as critical but as an enabler of collaboration to carry out front office activities as it made them feel safe and confident to seek help when needed. This knowledge was tacit, as it was never recorded by the hotel, and was informally and socially created and shared between employees during social outings, work meetings or on-the-job. As highlighted in the following vignette, both professional and personal people knowledge supported their collaboration as they developed an understanding of how to adapt and work with each other:

You have to understand that turnover is a reality in the hospitality industry. You have to accept it and understand that the industry is like that. Yes, some get bitter but they always find ways to adapt. Knowing when is a good time to approach them or how to ask them for help can help you adapt. Adapting to people is important to get the team working quickly. Staff turnover is frequent and regular so you say “ok this is the person I am working with at the moment let’s make the most of it”. You cannot afford to be whining about the person that left last week.

For example, people knowledge helped employees find ways of gaining assistance from colleagues such as seeking help from management or from another colleague who perhaps had socialised with them and had established some familiarity with them. If negative relationships existed between colleagues, a third person that had a higher position or a good relationship with one of the two would act as the intermediary. Finally, managing some work-related matters required gender sensitivity. In such cases, employees would seek the help of someone based on their gender. All approaches ensured collaboration and knowledge sharing were not affected. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

I usually tell people directly to their face but sometimes with Gary, when I know he is in a bad mood and he is in housekeeping, he gets annoyed and frustrated if I have been on the radio to him all day and have been annoying him with stupid little things. So when someone else gets on the shift I make them ask Gary my queries because I don’t want him to react badly.

The prevalence of labour instability in the hospitality industry in the Darwin hotel studies triggered these professional and non-professional social interactions that yielded friendship and trust relationships and in turn developed people knowledge. Employees worked in unstable labour environments because of the frequency of staff turnover, inter- and intra-hotel movements and shiftwork. For example, participants commented on the benefits of intra-hotel movements such as helping out other departments at times of slow work activity in the front office. They felt that being exposed to the activities of other departments and other colleagues helped them increase their professional and personal knowledge of others, which in turn supported their collaboration with those colleagues. The opportunity to acquire people knowledge from working in other areas and interacting with other colleagues is highlighted in the vignette below:

It’s good to go and work in other departments. It makes it easier to work together. It does help. We have a French guy who is a housekeeper. He wouldn’t respond to radio messages. After a few times I tried to contact him via radio but this time I said his name and he responded straight away. Now if you use his name he does it a lot quicker for you. Now I know how to approach him.

Shiftwork also had a cumulative effect on people knowledge. The more employees worked with each other, the more they came to know each other. Knowing each other meant they had people knowledge of one another, which helped them collaborate should they be rostered together again. In cases of new employees, shiftwork facilitated the rapid creation of people knowledge because they were exposed to existing employees on a variable and frequent basis. The following example pinpoints the advantages of shiftwork in terms of creating new or upgrading existing people knowledge:

I have worked with Emerald more, pretty much all my shifts with her. She's the only person I work with so I suppose her leaving will help me get used to and getting to know other people. I have worked with Siena once and I get along with her really well. Since then I have never worked with her before. So it will be good because it will give me the chance to know other people's style of work, people I haven't spoken to or worked with them.

The hotel chain offered opportunities for staff to interact through their formal organisational socialisation activities (orientation and induction to the working environment) or social interaction practices (regular staff barbeques) and formal communication structures (monthly staff meetings and one-to-one meetings between management and staff). The following comment pinpoints one of the benefits of one-to-one meetings:

We catch up for ten minutes. We do that to see how they are going in their life and make sure everything is fine. It gives employees a time out and they can talk to us about anything. Gives them a good opportunity to get to know us and us them.

Similarly, employees developed people knowledge both during their professional and non-professional interactions through voluntary behaviours matching the organisational citizenship profile such as helping or social interaction behaviours. What motivated employees to engage in these relationships were their employment motivations, their hospitality experience and most importantly their tenure in Darwin. Career-oriented employees ensured labour instability did not affect their own or their team's performance, as the latter was critical to fulfill their career progression aspirations. Moreover, having industry experience meant they were familiar with labour instability in the sector and also with moving frequently to pursue those career opportunities. As mentioned in the following example, this travelling experience helped them collaborate in both shorter timeframes and with colleagues they had not worked with for a sufficient length of time:

We always travelled for work and pleasure so we are used to it. The difficulty in transitioning to an environment is that you leave your home and have to make home another place for 4-6 weeks or longer. Once you have been doing for a while it gets easier.

It was not sufficient for non-career-oriented employees to only gain a professional understanding of their peers. Gaining a non-professional understanding of their peers was also an important factor influencing their quality of collaboration and it also helped them to fulfill their experiential motivations. These differences in participants' employment motivations suggested differences in the ways employees achieved the common goal of collaboration. Therefore, participants' employment motivations played an important role in supporting knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments.

Employees living and working in Darwin appeared to be positively influenced by the inevitability of labour instability in Darwin. This environment helped them develop or reinforce the importance of voluntary behaviours towards collaboration in such an unstable labour environment. Voluntary behaviours to facilitate collaboration suggested the need for certain levels of flexibility towards collaboration and knowledge sharing with peers because teams were very likely to change through labour instability. For career-oriented employees, voluntary behaviours towards collaboration were not new because they had been exposed to such situations before. For all employees (career and non-career-oriented) with no industry experience, their tenure in Darwin helped them develop and understand the importance of voluntary behaviours. Indeed voluntary

behaviours were perceived as an important survival strategy enabling them to cope with labour instability and acknowledge the importance of knowledge sharing and the difficulties in creating durable social networks. The following comment summarises perceptions of labour instability in Darwin and how it influences people's approach toward new people:

Darwin has a good atmosphere; it's laid back and the people here are so welcoming. People here are not from Darwin so they absorb Darwin's culture, which is non-judgmental and accepting of everyone. This culture does not exist in other regions. For example, people get to know each other within days over a beer. Everyone is nice probably because of their young age, being from different parts of Australia and not knowing anyone here or being on a working holiday so they are here to have fun meet new people.

Summarising, both types of employees perceived the notion and functional role of social networks differently. For career-oriented employees, social networks had a role of helping achieve their work tasks and contribute toward their long-term career goals. On the other hand, for non-career oriented employees social networks were a means of enabling them to fulfill their motivations of experiencing a different lifestyle and interacting with different people. Despite these differences, people knowledge emerged from the social networks of both types of employees and enabled them to complete their front office tasks despite the prevalence of labour instability and the associated time constraints.

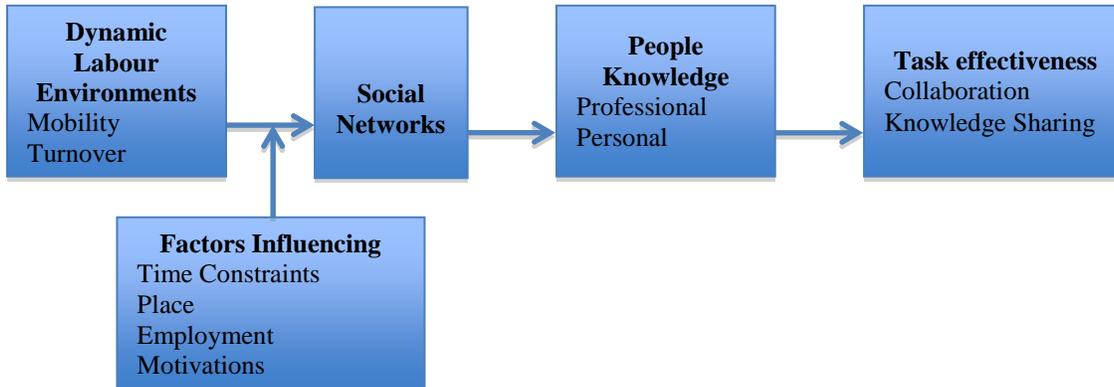
Discussion: Social capital supports knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments

Despite participants' different career-orientations, and different perceptions of social networks, the common characteristic emerging from both types of employees' social networks was professional and personal people knowledge. People knowledge appeared to be similar to what Borgatti and Cross [4] called learned relationship characteristics, characteristics such as knowing, value, access, and cost that helped employees seek information which developed from employees' social networks [26]. Cross et al. [8] argued that these learned characteristics had the potential to 'help people become better connected so the organization can get the true benefit of their expertise more quickly' (p. 112). Indeed, people knowledge facilitated collaboration by giving employees the opportunity to become flexible towards their professional relationship with peers [6]. This flexibility gave colleagues the opportunity to align or adapt themselves to peers they had not interacted or worked with for a long time, which in turn enabled them to collaborate and share knowledge (Figure 1). This finding seems to support Wilson et al.'s [35] argument that social capital has the potential to save time in business transactions (such as collaboration and knowledge sharing) as well as the findings of Bozkurt and Mohr [5] who argued that social capital, developed between employees in geographically dispersed strategic business units, supported collaboration. Finally, this finding is consistent with social network research arguing that knowledge sharing often occurs between actors who have not had sufficient time to interact and create the necessary knowledge sharing conditions [14, 5].

Social capital variations are caused turnover and mobility [16]. Although mobility and turnover have been described as negatively affecting the creation of social capital it is important to explain that in this research context, mobility, turnover and other factors triggering labour instability, together with other factors (e.g. employment motivations), positively influenced the creation of people knowledge. Indeed, the sheer labour instability of this research context gave way to ongoing change in the composition of the front office team as well as the interaction between

employees, and triggered the ongoing creation and update of people knowledge. This finding supports the notion of the strength of weak ties as depicted by Granovetter [13, 14], appears to add nuances to research arguing the importance of network stability [18], and confirms Halpern's [16] discussion on mobility and turnover and the variations they cause on the creation of social capital. Therefore, it could be argued that people knowledge could be a form of relational social capital with the difference that it develops more in unstable labour environments and in shorter time frames than in other geographical and labour contexts. The relatively quick emergence of people knowledge and the resulting social capital is based on place-based (Darwin) factors and associated time frames.

Figure 1: Social capital supports knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments



Finally, people knowledge was an outcome of friendship, comfort and professional relationships, which were triggered both by the employees and the hotel chain. The creation of people knowledge through the development of professional and social interactions could be consistent with the rationale of the social construction of knowledge. According to Berger and Luckman [3] the social construction of knowledge is a 'social phenomenon that is continually built and re-built and emerges in interpersonal and group processes, processes which themselves can potentially be enhanced through certain management interventions' [19, p. 4]. Indeed, based on the results of this research, people knowledge emerged from actions initiated by both employees and the hotel chain.

Conclusion

This research investigated how people knowledge, a form of social capital that emerged from social networks, helped employees working in dynamic labour environments share knowledge. Interviewing employees from three different hotels in the NT of Australia revealed that the interaction of employees' formal and informal social networks produced people knowledge that, despite the dynamic labour conditions, enabled employees to share knowledge and collaborate. This form of social capital developed in relatively shorter timeframes and helped employee collaboration and consequently supported knowledge sharing, critical for the operation of the front office departments.

What we found was that the context played a key role with regard to the creation and development of social capital. Shorter timeframes, turnover patterns, isolation, and other aspects specific to this dynamic environment of Darwin can be used to develop strategies, which assist the creation of people knowledge and consequently result in relational capital within the organisation.

The findings suggest that businesses could shift their focus away from minimising or eradicating labour instability and focus more on supporting employees to create personal and professional people knowledge. For example, businesses could create more opportunities to enable employees to interact and could create emergent properties in the form of people knowledge to provide a platform for successful collaboration. Businesses could also increase their formal approach toward organisational and interpersonal socialisation to offer employees opportunities to interact and develop professionally as well as personally. Additionally, behavioural interviewing recruitment strategies could be revised to include questions that will help management detect personalities and characters with appropriate interpersonal skills to engage in social networks.

This finding is also applicable to multinational corporations where synchronous and asynchronous collaboration between geographically dispersed business units is critical. With the help of people knowledge or other emergent social network properties, collaboration, and consequently, knowledge sharing, could take place between employees as members of virtual teams who have never worked with each other before. This could support businesses product and service innovation or streamlining of processes.

Furthermore, the finding highlights the importance of non-career-oriented employees in hospitality. The numerical balance between career and non-career-oriented employees in front office teams led both types of employees to complement each other in different ways and collaborate and share knowledge. Perhaps this could suggest that some industries or sectors might benefit from the combination of career and non-career-oriented employees in teams. It could also make businesses aware of the positive influence of non-career-oriented employees and consequently make them more appealing to such employers. Indeed this could be very important when the availability of career-oriented employees in certain places is scarce.

This research was limited to studying knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments. The findings presented cannot paint an all-encompassing picture of knowledge management in dynamic labour environments. Studying other aspects of knowledge management could certainly be the topic of future research across different industries and destinations. Furthermore, future research could engage in studying and understanding the role of social capital in other knowledge management activities. The measurement of social capital in this research is preliminary and needs further development and verification. Finally, this research was based on the hospitality industry of Darwin in the Northern Territory because labour instability in this environment appeared to be more prevalent when compared to other destinations or industries. Therefore the findings of this research should be cautiously applied to other industries or hospitality sectors as the prevalence of labour instability may differ between sectors and industries. It may also be that Darwin's remoteness and the type of workforce it attracts (backpackers and career-oriented employees) may explain the findings relating to the development of relatively weak relationships in shorter timeframes.

In conclusion, the development of people knowledge is an important concept, which informs research in the social network domain. Future research could examine the emergent properties of social network's influence on knowledge sharing in other dynamic labour environments and additionally how they influence other aspects of knowledge management such as the acquisition, storing and processing of knowledge. Furthermore, as people knowledge appears to develop in shorter timeframes than previously found, further research on the length of time needed for people knowledge to be created using social capital measurement constructs is critical.

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English Abstract

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract

Most of the knowledge sharing discussion has focused on the factors influencing and the role of knowledge sharing in organisational effectiveness and performance. The most common factors relate to an organisation's structure, infrastructure and practices (e.g. job design), individual employees (e.g. social networks) and types of knowledge (e.g. tacit). This paper is motivated by the assumption within the knowledge sharing literature that labour stability is essential to create and nurture the above knowledge sharing factors. Focusing on the individual factors and in particular the role of social networks in knowledge sharing, this paper aims to understand how properties emerging from social networks, referred to as people knowledge, can be perceived as a form of social capital that is developed in shorter timeframes and supports intra-organisational knowledge sharing in dynamic labour environments. Dynamic labour environments in this research were hospitality businesses experiencing frequent changes in the composition of teams of employees. Indeed the social network literature suggests the need for labour stability for the emergence of social network properties such as social capital. This requirement of labour stability though may be challenged in some contexts and industries such as the hospitality industry of the Northern Territory of Australia. Qualitative data collection techniques were used to acquire data from seventy-six front-office employees of three hotels in Darwin. The findings suggest the emergence of social capital in dynamic labour environments and the important role of social capital in supporting collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Social networks, social capital, knowledge sharing, people knowledge, dynamic labour environments, hospitality, Northern Territory (NT).

French Abstract*

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

La création du capital social dans des temps plus courts et son rôle dans le partage de la connaissance

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Résumé

La majeure partie de la discussion académique sur le partage de la connaissance s'est concentrée sur les facteurs qui l'influencent et le rôle de celle-ci dans l'efficacité organisationnelle et la performance. Les facteurs qui influent le plus sont habituellement la structure organisationnelle, l'infrastructure et les pratiques (par exemple la création de poste), les employés (par exemple les réseaux sociaux) et les types de connaissances (par exemple tacites). Cet article se fonde sur l'hypothèse, suggérée par la littérature, que la stabilité de la main-d'œuvre est une condition essentielle pour créer et consolider les facteurs favorisant le partage de la connaissance. En se concentrant sur les facteurs individualistes, et en particulier le rôle des réseaux sociaux, cet article vise à comprendre comment les propriétés qui émergent des réseaux sociaux, dont la connaissance de personnes, peuvent être perçues comme une forme de capital social se développant dans des temps courts et qui favorise le partage de la connaissance intra-organisationnelle dans des environnements de travail dynamiques. Les environnements professionnels dynamiques de cette recherche étaient des hôtels, qui subissent des changements fréquents dans la composition de leurs équipes d'employés. En effet, la littérature sur les réseaux sociaux suggère qu'il est nécessaire que la main-d'œuvre soit stable pour que les propriétés des réseaux sociaux se produisent. Cette condition de stabilité de la main-d'œuvre est cependant difficile à tenir dans certains contextes et secteurs tels que l'hôtellerie dans le Nord de l'Australie. Des entretiens qualitatifs ont permis de rassembler des données auprès de soixante-seize employés de la fonction "accueil" dans trois hôtels à Darwin. Les résultats montrent l'apparition du capital social dans des environnements de travail dynamiques et le rôle important que joue ce capital social pour favoriser la collaboration et le partage de la connaissance.

Mots-clés : Réseaux sociaux, capital social, le partage de la connaissance, connaissance de personnes, environnements de travail dynamiques, hôtellerie, territoire du Nord d'Australie.

*Translated by: Johannes Schaaper, Senior professor in International Management, BEM Bordeaux Management School

Spanish Abstract*

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

Creación de Capital Social en el Corto Plazo y su Rol en el Conocimiento Compartido

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Resumen

La mayoría de las investigaciones sobre el conocimiento compartido se han enfocado en el rol del conocimiento compartido y de los factores que influyen en la eficiencia de la organización y su rendimiento. Los factores más comunes son los relacionados con la estructura de la organización, infraestructura y prácticas (ej. diseño del trabajo), empleados (ej. redes sociales) y tipos de conocimiento (ej. tácito). La motivación de este artículo resulta de la premisa, dentro de la literatura del conocimiento compartido, de que la estabilidad laboral es esencial para crear y nutrir los factores que influyen en el conocimiento compartido. El objetivo de este artículo es el entender el rol de las redes sociales en el conocimiento compartido, y cómo las propiedades que emergen de estas redes, denominadas conocimiento de las personas, pueden ser percibidas como una forma de capital social que es desarrollado de modo más rápido y da soporte al conocimiento compartido intra-organizacional en entornos de trabajo muy dinámicos. Los entornos dinámicos considerados en este trabajo fueron los de la industria hotelera, que experimentan una rotación de empleados alta en los equipos de trabajo. De hecho, la literatura de redes sociales sugiere la necesidad de estabilidad laboral para que surjan las propiedades de la redes sociales, como el capital social.

Sin embargo este requerimiento de estabilidad puede ser cuestionado en algunos contextos e industrias como la industria hotelera en el norte de Australia. A través de métodos de investigación cualitativos se obtuvo información sobre setenta y seis empleados de oficina en tres hoteles en Darwin. Los resultados sugieren el surgimiento del capital social en entornos laborales dinámicos y la importancia del capital social para promover la colaboración y el conocimiento compartido.

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German Abstract*

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

Die kurzfristige Bildung von Sozialkapital und dessen Rolle im Knowledge Sharing

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Zusammenfassung

Der Kern der Diskussion rund um die Knowledge Sharing Diskussion fokussierte bis jetzt auf die Einflussfaktoren und die Rolle des Knowledge Sharings auf organisationale Effektivität und Performance. Die meisten dieser Faktoren beziehen sich auf die Struktur einer Organisation, auf die Infrastruktur und die Verhaltensweisen (z.B. im Job Design), Individuen (z.B. soziale Netzwerke) und die verschiedenen Wissenstypen. Dieses Paper wird motiviert von der Annahme, dass in der Knowledge Sharing Literatur Arbeitsstabilität eine existentielle Basis dafür darstellt, um Knowledge Sharing Faktoren sich herausbilden und etablieren können. Der Fokus wird dabei auf individuelle Faktoren gelegt, hier insbesondere auf die Rolle von sozialen Netzwerken. Die Autoren wollen insbesondere die Eigenschaften verstehen, die von sozialen Netzwerken ausgehen und die als gemeinschaftliches Wissen gelten, welche als seine Form von Sozialkapital angesehen werden kann. Dieses wird kurzfristig entwickelt und unterstützt intra-organisationales Knowledge Sharing besonders in dynamischen Arbeitsumgebungen. Das Paper basiert auf qualitativen Data von 76 Angestellten im Kundendienst von drei Hotels in Darwin. Die Ergebnisse belegen die kurzfristige Herausbildung von Sozialkapital in dynamischen Arbeitsumgebungen und die Bedeutende Rolle von Sozialkapital bei Kooperation und Knowledge Sharing.

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Italian Abstract*

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

La creazione del capitale sociale in tempi brevi e il suo ruolo nella condivisione del sapere

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Abstract

La maggior parte del dibattito sulla condivisione del sapere si è concentrata su fattori che influenzano questi aspetti rispetto all'efficacia e redditività aziendale. I fattori più comuni sono quelli relativi alla struttura organizzativa, infrastrutture e pratiche aziendali (ad esempio organizzazione del lavoro), aspetti individuali (ad esempio reti sociali) e tipologie del sapere (ad esempio tacito). Questo studio origina dalla convinzione, tratta da studi sulla condivisione del sapere, che la stabilirà lavorativa e' essenziale nel creare e sviluppare i fattori di condivisione del sapere di cui sopra. Nel focalizzarsi su fattori individuali, ed in particolare sul ruolo delle reti sociali nella condivisione del sapere, questo studio ambisce ad analizzare come proprietà che emergono dalle reti sociali, intrinsecamente relative al sapere delle persone, possono essere percepite ad espressione di capitale sociale che si sviluppa a breve termine e supporta dinamiche di condivisione del sapere all'interno dell'azienda in contesti dinamici di lavoro. Questi contesti dinamici di lavoro nella presente ricerca erano attività nel settore alberghiero che hanno cambiamenti frequenti nella composizione delle loro squadre di lavoro. La letteratura specializzata evidenzia la necessità di stabilità nel lavoro per generare capitale sociale. Questo aspetto può venire a meno in contesti e industrie come quella alberghiera in Nord Australia. Sono stati utilizzati metodi di raccolta dati qualitativi da sessantasei impiegati di reception di tre hotel in Darwin. I risultati dello studio evidenziano l'emergere di capitale sociale in ambienti di lavoro dinamici e il ruolo importante del capitale sociale nel supportare collaborazione e condivisione del sapere.

Parole chiave: Reti sociali, capitale sociale, condivisione del sapere, il sapere delle persone, ambienti di lavoro, settore alberghiero, Territori del Nord

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Arabic Abstract*

Social Capital Creation in Shorter Timeframes and its Role in Knowledge Sharing

خلق رأس العمل الإجتماعي على مدى فترات زمنية قصيرة و دوره في تشارك المعرفة

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خلاصة

ركزت معظم مناقشات على العوامل المؤثرة على التشارك في المعرفة و دورها في الفعالية و الأداء المؤسسي . ترتبط العوامل العامة الأكثر شيوعا بهيكلية المؤسسة، و بنيتها التحتية و الممارسات (مثال: تصميم العمل)، و الموظفين كأفراد (مثال : الشبكات الإجتماعية)، و أنماط المعرفة (مثال : المعرفة الضمنية). المحرك وراء هذا البحث هو الإفتراض ضمن ادبيات تشارك المعرفة بأن إستقرار العمالة ضروري لخلق ورعاية عوامل التشارك بالمعرفة السابق ذكرها. عبر التركيز على العوامل الفردية وبالأخص دور الشبكات الإجتماعية في تشارك المعرفة، يسعى هذا البحث إلى فهم كيف ان الخصائص الناجمة عن الشبكات الإجتماعية، والتي يشار إليها "كمعرفة الناس"، يمكن النظر إليها كرأس مال إجتماعي يتطور على مدى فترات زمنية أقصر، و يدعم المشاركة في المعرفة داخل المؤسسة في ظل بيئة العمالة النشطة. وفرت الأعمال في قطاع الضيافة المثال المستخدم في هذا البحث حول بيئة العمل النشطة كونها تشهد تغيرات متكررة في تركيبة فرق الموظفين. في واقع الأمر، تقترح الأدبيات حول الشبكات الإجتماعية الحاجة إلى الإستقرار في العمالة لبروز خصائص الشبكات الإجتماعية مثل: رأس المال الإجتماعي . ومع ذلك يمكن تحدي متطلب إستقرار العمالة هذا في ظروف سياق وقطاعات اقتصادية معينة مثل قطاع الضيافة في المنطقة الشمالية من أستراليا. تم استخدام أساليب جمع البيانات النوعية للحصول على البيانات من ستة وسبعون موظفا من موظفي المكاتب الأمامية لثلاثة فنادق في منطقة داروين- أستراليا. تشير النتائج الى ظهور رأس المال الإجتماعي في بيئات العمالة النشطة و دوره المهم في دعم التعاون و التشارك في المعرفة.

الإجتماعية، رأس المال الإجتماعي، تشارك المعرفة، معرفة الناس، بيئات العمل النشطة، قطاع الشبكات: الكلمات الرئيسية
أستراليا-الضيافة، المنطقة الشمالية (م . ش)

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