

Knowledge Creation and its Barriers in SMEs: An Exploratory Analysis

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Abstract: Prior research on knowledge creation has mainly been addressed to larger organizations by exploring both the determinants and barriers. However, the importance of knowledge creation in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remains largely unexplored with only a few authors attempting to study the enablers and barriers. Thus, this paper will investigate the specifically the barriers to knowledge creation in SMEs and at the levels at which these barriers exist. Through qualitative exploratory methods this study is set in Indian subcontinent. The results of the research show several barriers i.e., lack of motivational leadership and recognition thereof, lack of remuneration, trust, and expressive ties being grouped into organizational and individual barriers for knowledge creation in SMEs. Based on these, a proposed model and four further propositions for future studies are presented, since the findings of our study are based on limited sampling. This model can be a starting point for future research.

Keywords: Knowledge creation, barriers, SMEs, India, exploratory research, grounded theory.

1 Introduction

Knowledge is an essential source for sustainability of organizations' competitive advantage (Eze et al, 2013) and knowledge management practices, which include set of methods and techniques to support and enhance the organizational processes of knowledge creation, storage, transfer/sharing, and application are increasingly becoming an integral business function for many firms (Cerchione Esposito and Spadaro, 2015; Wang and Noe, 2010). Further, the creation of new knowledge has been recognised as one of the most valuable resources in today's organisations (Chung and Jackson, 2011) and firms take enormous effort to identify the way new knowledge can be created for increasing their competitiveness (Nghah and Jusoff, 2009). Further, this also presents a challenge specially for smaller firms as they usually lack tools and facilities to best utilize their knowledge (Ibrahim and Heng, 2014). Making knowledge management activities effective in SMEs has been a challenge (Massaro et al., 2016) as the knowledge in SMEs is mostly embedded in employees and it is tacit in nature (Nghah and Jusoff, 2009), there is a strong need to create, share and disseminate knowledge among co-workers, contributing to SME's success (Kao et al, 2011).

Furthermore, creating knowledge can give competitive advantage for organizations (Mitchell, 2010), can increase innovation, offer novel ideas, and make them more stable during uncertain times (Wang et al., 2017). However, challenges still exist in retaining knowledge workers (Anand and Walsh, 2015), as knowledge is inherently an individual-level construct (Jackson, Chuang, Harden, & Jiang, 2006) and knowledge creation is partly an individual activity (Grant, 1996) on which firms are dependent. SMEs strive for becoming knowledge intensive and to also gain competitive advantage. SMEs are often confronted with a barrier that may hinder them from initiating or completing their innovative ideas and to create knowledge (Purcarea et al., 2013). These issues in the management and creation of knowledge still exist (Sofek-Borowska, 2017) across SMEs (Eze et al., 2013).

Knowledge creation occurs at various forms e.g. Nonaka and Konno (1998) and Nonaka et al. (2000) see the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge as coming about by means of socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization (SECI), leading to new and enhanced levels of knowledge (Grimsdottir and Edvardsson, 2018) hence knowledge creation is mainly the result of the individual's mental interactions and in firms it

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can help to develop new ideas or solve problems (Solek-Borowska, 2017). Thus, knowledge creation is defined as the act of making knowledge created by the individuals and amplifying it in social contexts, and selectively connecting it to the existing knowledge in the organization (von Krogh, et al., 2012). Schulz (2001) identified three types of knowledge creation processes: 1. encoding existing knowledge suitable for transmission; 2. combining existing knowledge – when current information is captured and used in a historical context; and 3. production of new knowledge, which provides new insights into the organization. On the other hand, literature on knowledge creation has been studied mostly from larger organizations (Brix, 2017, Lloria 2008, Nonaka, 1994), and creating knowledge in SMEs remains unexplored in its broader context (e.g. size, geography, culture etc.). Understanding knowledge creation processes are critical for SMEs in their effort to make an optimum use of knowledge flowing within the organization (Solek-Borowska, 2017). Knowledge creation is important for firms because over a period of time the process knowledge loss will create knowledge deficit in the organizational knowledge balance (Bratianu, 2015) and there are only few authors, who have attempted to study the barriers of knowledge creation in literature, even lesser studies exist in an Indian context. (e.g Singh et al., 2006; Pillania, 2008). Thus, this paper will specifically focus on the barriers to knowledge creation by formulating the following two research questions: 1) What barriers exist toward knowledge creation among employees in Indian SMEs? and 2) At what levels do the barriers to knowledge creation exist?

This paper will thus contribute to the growing corpus of literature on knowledge creation in SMEs and from different geographical context. The paper is structured as follows 1) we first present an outline about the literature evidence on knowledge creation in SMEs and will present its barriers, 2) followed with a detailed methodology and 3) the findings will be presented and discussed with 4) conclusion and future points to investigate by a follow-up research.

2 Knowledge Creation in SMEs

To understand the barriers to knowledge creation, we used diverse set of keywords and performed the search in various database and as the scope of studies were limited in SMEs, and as suggested Grimsdottir and Edvardsson (2018) that knowledge creation studies in SMEs are very limited (Massaro et al., 2016), and it is mostly studied from strategic perspective in enhancing innovation (Omar et al., 2016), we found fewer works that constitute on barriers to knowledge creation. Often, knowledge creation in SMEs occurs at individual level and lack of interaction, culture of information tools can become barriers to knowledge creation (Spraggon and Bodolica, 2008), and the sharing abilities, experiences, emotions and know-how by managers, can also be barriers (Balestrin et al., 2008).

Further knowledge creation occurs at organizational level through networks, and some barriers that may resist knowledge creation are culture (Jordão and Novas, 2017), individual learning (Apostolos et al., 2017), manager's role, SME owners (Law and Chan, 2017), absence of consultants (Bradshaw and Cragg, 2015). Thus, individual survival strategy can also make employee to stop the knowledge creation is a survival strategy and competitive advantage for SMEs (Pérez-Luño et al., 2016). For SMEs, the key performance barriers for innovation are knowledge creation (Purcarea et al., 2013). Competitive aggressiveness and innovativeness are key mediators between knowledge creation and organizations performance in SMEs (Zacca et al., 2015). On the other hand, barriers like competition (Qi and Li, 2008), entrepreneurial orientation (Omar et al., 2016), quality of learning (Apostolos et al., 2017), organizational culture (Jordão and Novas, 2017), consultant relations (Bradshaw and Cragg, 2015), shift the technological paradigm (Guerrieri and Pietrobelli, 2004) and are found to affect knowledge creation.

3 Methodologies

Superficial beliefs and cultural values are seemingly high in Indian SMEs (Anand and Walsh, 2015) and to understand the individual perspective towards knowledge creation involves the cognitive and emotional dimensions. Hence this study adopts in-depth interviews followed with qualitative approach in our research. These methods can benefit in understanding the insights into people's feelings and thoughts (Sutton and Austin, 2015). While collecting data, an exploratory stance and some of the grounded theory precepts were adopted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to identify different patterns underlying barriers to knowledge creation. The SMEs were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in interviews i.e., convenience sampling (Wrenn, et al., 2007) that is acceptable for exploratory research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Exploratory research was applied with grounded theory methods to identify different patterns behind knowledge creation (e.g Ford and Angermeier, 2004; Wastell, 2001; Wong and Aspinwall, 2005). This is relevant when the research is based on the interactions and behaviour of the subject (Goulding and Saren, 2010). The initial research questions included investigating the barriers existing towards knowledge creation in Indian SMEs and the levels of these barriers. The aim was to discover concrete knowledge creation barriers and to formulate prepositions to further research. The initial research questions helped identify the phenomenon of knowledge creation. Then data was collected and analysed, and in the end the main results – the prepositions and the research model – were summarized in a research paper.

The present is set to explore the barriers to knowledge creation in Indian SMEs. SMEs in India are classified as Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) and are distinguished by their annual turnover, headcount, and

potential export revenues. MSMEs constitute an important part of the Indian economy, consisting of 36 million units providing employment to over 80 million people and contribute about 8% to the national GDP. MSMEs provide 45% of the total manufacturing output and 40% of exports from the country (Dhamija and Arora, 2017). Indian SMEs can also further be classified into goods manufacturers/producers and service providers/renderers (Jain and Gandhi, 2016). When postulating the findings in this paper, a focus was both on investigating the combination of manufacturing and service industries and it is believed that the findings and recommendations would nevertheless be useful to SMEs in other contexts as well.

The data collection process started with an informal interview followed by analysis and framing the text into meaningful summaries. The interviews provided an opportunity to systematically investigate the research questions.

Thus, interviews were semi-structured and adjusted according to the flow of discussion, giving the respondent an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings (Holloway, 1997).

Nine SMEs agreed to participate in the study from the southern region of India. Two main questions were used and subsequently, the questions were exchanged and rephrased during the flow of the discussion:

- What factors do you consider important for creating knowledge within the organization with your colleagues that can support innovation?
- What factors discourage you from creating knowledge for your organization?

The details of respondents and firms are summarized in Table 1. Firms' names have been numerated for anonymity.

The interviews with a sample of 27 employees lasted between 25-35 minutes. Field notes, transcripts of interactions and interviews were analysed and numerated using methodology of Saldana (2009). From the sample, 24 to 38 years old participants (excluding managers) with more than 3 years of work experience (as suggested by managers and heads of SMEs) were identified to be the main knowledge creators.

4 Findings and Discussions

Many respondents expressed that they create, improvise, or work on finding new solutions through knowledge creation. Creating knowledge in the respondents' context means finding new ideas, new customers, and new knowledge to expand the business and finding innovative solutions to problems to remain competitive. After presentation of the findings, a new model including organisational and individual barriers toward knowledge creation in SMEs will be proposed.

4.1 Expressive Ties

Expressive ties are considered by Manev and Stevenson (2001) as strong relations between individuals and stand for offering friendship and social support. Several respondents have strong intentions to help knowledge creation but only when they have strong bonds and friendship with their colleagues. For example: 'I like to engage in knowledge creation only when I feel that my colleague is co-operative, encouraging or maintain a great friendship with me. If there is friendship, it can help not only to create new knowledge, but great innovations otherwise there is nothing but low interest. The closer my colleagues are with me; the ideas are fascinating, and creativity is at its best or we face issues. If there are no strong ties, it won't help us to coordinate to help the organization for any knowledge creation' (Respondents 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 26). It is evident due to the smaller size and lower bureaucracy in SMEs, that workers in SMEs quickly develop strong friendships. Individuals are likely to engage in knowledge creation toward those who offer friendships and social support to them. So, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Lack of expressive ties has negative relation towards knowledge creation in SMEs.

4.2 Trust

Trust between individuals (and co-workers) encourages in new knowledge creation. For example, many respondents expressed: 'I feel that when my colleagues are not cheating or threatening, we share ideas that help create new knowledge' (Respondents 6, 13, 15, 17, 21). 'If trust exists, there is reciprocating factor for knowledge creation. When I know that one of my colleagues has good abilities, I try to win his trust and have a trusting relationship, so that I am not ignored while needing knowledge or in a knowledge creation process. I participate in knowledge creation with colleagues that is based on a helping nature, trust, cooperation at work, being honest and being less political' (Respondents 8, 11, 16, 18, 20). Individuals do not engage in knowledge creation when they feel uncertain about their relationship with other co-workers. Trust is the focal point of every intra-organizational relationship (Okyere-Kwakye and Khalil, 2011) and can enhance the act of knowledge creation of members by creating higher degree of cooperation and commitment (Molm, 2003). The lower the trust between individuals, the higher the negative occurrence is on the activities of knowledge creation. So, we derive the proposition stating:

Proposition 2: Lack of trust among co-workers has negative effects towards knowledge creation in SMEs.

4.3 Remuneration

Organizational application of an unfair bias when deciding payment and giving bonuses are mentioned by respondents. For example, respondents said: 'I have seen my supervisor getting rewards and a spike in salary for the contributions

Table 1: Summary of respondents and firms.

SME code	Respondent code	Respondent	Industry	Category
1	1, 2, 3	Data analyst, operating officer, office manager	Market research Services	Small
2	4, 5, 6	Estate assistance, office assistant, assistant supervisor	Property services	Small
3	7, 8, 9	Property manager, estate assistance, office establishment executive	Manufacturing and Construction	Small
4	10, 11, 12	Assistant manager, customer supervisor and club officer	Food and Leisure services	Small
5	13, 14, 15	Operation assistant, assistant supervisor and delivery officer	Manufacturing	Medium
6	16, 17, 18	Electrification assistant, transformer operator, engineer trainee	Manufacturing	Medium
7	19, 20, 21	Admin assistant, application developer, service engineer	ICT services	Medium
8	22, 23, 24	Purchase assistant, customer executive and loading officer	Food Exports and Manufacturing	Medium
9	25, 26, 27	Marketing executive, customer relation executive and office supervisor	ICT services	Medium

we made, and we received no rewards. We don't see a fair practice when it comes to salary, although it's a secret, but When we know that the effort we put in is remunerated less than others, it hurts our feelings. We often see people who Do not do much work getting high pay, this makes us not to want to contribute to knowledge creation' (Respondents 5, 7, 22, 24, 27). Fairness within organizational settings originates from works in social psychology aimed at understanding fairness issues in social interactions (Brock et al., 2005). The assessment of fairness contributes to understanding a wide range of human attitudes and behaviours in organizations. Since knowledge creation is a process and cannot be forced, cooperation on behalf of employees is critical. Fairness practice (treating employees fairly, paying those rewards and a competitive salary) can empower and motivate individuals to share and create knowledge; otherwise the transmitter hides the knowledge (Lin, 2007). Henceforth, we derive the following proposition:

Proposition 3: Lack of remuneration in SMEs is negatively related to knowledge creation in SMEs.

4.4 Motivational Leadership and Recognition

SMEs have a less bureaucratic structure than large corporations and they depend on the size of the operation and a less formalized reporting structure. Our respondents Expressed that example they do not get enough motivation from their leaders and supervisors to creating knowledge.

For example, one responded said: 'I have many times Felt humiliated/abused by my supervisor and not been treated Well for my work, this reduces my motivation. I Stopped Giving creative ideas and would rather just work and focus on what needs to be done. My supervisor is abusive, and it does not motivate me to come up with innovations or Solutions, if I do so, it hardly gets recognized. Even when we try to create something new, our leaders take credit for that and we get no recognition or no platform to appreciate us' (Respondents 4, 9, 15, 18, 23, 25). Based on previous research (Burke, 1986), motivation has become a prominent aspect from the relational or power sharing view in organizational research. According to Srivastava et al (2006), employees will be inspired and motivated to contribute to knowledge if they receive equitable recognition from their motivational leaders. The more their superiors recognize the employees' contribution, the more motivated the employees become. Leader's coaching will help team members solve problems together and therefore provide opportunities to create and share knowledge (Arnold et al., 2000).

Accordingly, SMEs have a great opportunity to derive benefits from motivational their employees, which could enhance their knowledge creation capabilities. Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 4: Motivational leadership and recognition affect individuals towards knowledge creation in SMEs. From these findings, a model is proposed to present the

barriers toward knowledge creation in SMEs, including organizational and individual barriers (Figure 1.).

This model groups the barriers identified to organizational and individual barriers for knowledge creation in SMEs. The model itself can also be a starting point for future research and deeper analysis.

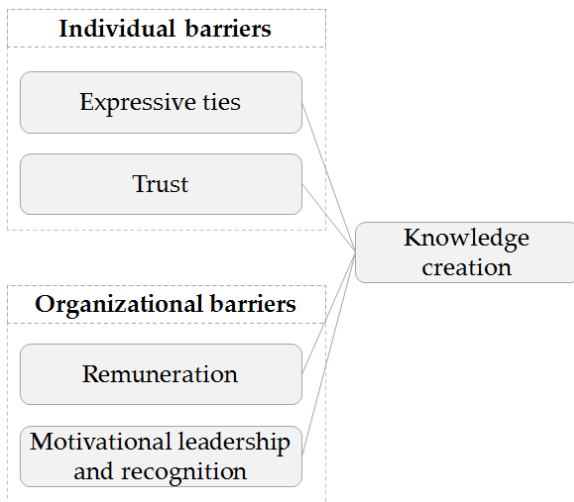


Fig.1: Individual and organizational level barriers to knowledge creation.

5 Implications and Future Research

In Indian SMEs, organizational support/expectation and co-worker's relation to each other can help individuals achieving knowledge creation. SMEs focusing on knowledge creation to remain competitive are of high importance, and managing the barriers revealed in this study can help SMEs to improve their knowledge creation process.

The present study attempts to contribute to existing academic and industrial knowledge, particularly regarding SMEs in India. Organizations having a fair practice in remuneration rewards and bonuses can increase innovation through knowledge creation, and organizations should consider providing a transparent way of compensation. Managers of SMEs need to empower, motivate, and support their employees to contribute more. At the same time, reduction of abusive behaviour and authoritarian behaviour over their employees may bring significant improvements in relation to knowledge creation, enhancing and increasing opportunities to innovate.

Furthermore, recognition practices for creating new knowledge and praising those who contributed increases effective knowledge creation. Praise and commendation from managers increase employees' performance more than financial rewards (Dewhurst et al., 2009) and organizations with recognition practices are twelve times more likely to have stronger business outcomes (Deloitte, 2012). From a strategic perspective, creating knowledge is further

influenced by social networks among employees and creating stronger connections and this can enhance the commitment of employees, which, in turn enhances knowledge creation capabilities (Solek-Borowska, 2017). Co-workers' relations (e.g. trust and expressive ties) in SMEs are major factors towards creating knowledge and managers must ensure a good work environment to facilitate better built social relations and trust among employees. It is difficult to argue and draw conclusions on whether knowledge creation is more dependent on people or various systems. This study can be further expanded to include a larger sample for better understanding of the results and by expanding to different geographical regions. It can also serve as a starting point for cross-country comparisons by providing insight into one specific geographical area. Future in-depth research may also further analyse the issues raised in this paper.

6 Conclusions

Several publications have dealt with knowledge creation in larger organizations, but creating knowledge is unexplored in SMEs, especially the barriers to knowledge creation in an Indian perspective. Thus, the objective of this paper was to study the barriers to knowledge creation in SMEs in India and to understand the barriers to knowledge. 27 employees were interviewed from 9 SMEs and exploratory research and grounded theory methods were applied to identify different patterns behind knowledge creation. The identified barriers include having a lack of motivational leadership and recognition, lack of remuneration, lack of trust, and lack of expressive ties.

The findings of this study are specific to SMEs in India and are based on limited sampling. The research study was conducted in the southern region of India, the views expressed may change not only in other regions of India but may also show differences when compared to European countries.

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