

Using Stories To Share Knowledge: A Malaysian Organization Case Study

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ABSTRACT:

There has not been much literature that focuses on using stories as a knowledge transfer approach in Malaysia. This study explores the understanding and perception of employees on the usage of stories to transfer knowledge in an institute of higher learning. Data was gathered through semi structured interviews and analyzed with the assistance of qualitative analysis software NVivo. The findings indicate that stories in the organization are mainly used for transferring work-related experience. Factors such as comfortability, informal settings, the story topic and content are influential in the success of using stories as a knowledge transfer tool. The study was conducted in one organization of a higher learning institution setting therefore further research can be to study the practice of knowledge management storytelling in other organizations of different structure in different industry. The results of this study could attribute to the better understanding of the practice of storytelling and the factors that influence storytelling within such environment.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Knowledge transfer, Knowledge sharing*

Introduction

In this new economy, knowledge and expertise of employees need to be seen as a critical strategic resource (Drucker, 1992; Bender & Fish, 2000) and organizations need to explore ways in retaining them (Joe & Yoong, 2006). However, capturing knowledge particularly tacit knowledge has been one of the main challenges in knowledge management (Santoro & Brezillon, 2005). One of the ways to capture knowledge is through storytelling. Storytelling is a part of human's daily life. Everybody tells stories everyday without even realizing it. Recently, storytelling has become a potential approach in knowledge transfer. Stories are a fundamental form of knowledge and communication and are particularly suited to knowledge management (Ma & Keppell, 2004). Storytelling is a powerful tool in knowledge capturing as storytelling is a natural and direct behaviour (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006). Given the nature of stories, storytelling is suitable for conveying tacit knowledge (Reamy, 2002; Swap et al. 2001; LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006; Hannabuss, 2000). Stories provide a bridge between the tacit and the explicit form of knowledge as stories conveys the speaker's moral attitude (Linde, 2001). Stories told in organizations are most effective when they focus on teaching, inspiring, motivating, and adding meaning (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006). Organizations such as NASA (Post, 2003; Bailey, 2005), 3M (Shaw et al, 1998), IBM (Tietze et al, 2003) Shell (The Opal Team, 2001) and Kumba Resource (Tobin, 2008), a mining company in South Africa have formal platforms in which storytelling happens. While the importance of using stories in knowledge capture and transfer is increasingly drawing the attention of organization (Becerra-Hernandez et al, 2004), it has never really become a major focus (Reamy, 2005)

Storytelling in organization settings can be seen negatively as stories circulated are probably not work related therefore being deemed as a waste of time (Reamy, 2005). However, in the modern business world, storytelling (narrative) is emerging as an important informal method of communication in modern organizations and is regarded as important to convey experiences of work whilst communicating shared knowledge and learning and maintaining organizational memory (Lehaney et. al, 2003). Furthermore, this criticism is likely a result of a misunderstanding of what storytelling can do for knowledge management in companies, and more importantly the techniques involved in implementing storytelling as a tool (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006). Kalid (2008) conducted a case study on the perception of storytelling among government employees which see the results indicate a lack of understanding and unfamiliarity on the concept of storytelling as a knowledge transfer tool. The understanding of storytelling practice for the purpose of sharing knowledge is still unclear.

Objectives And Scope Of Study

The significant of this study is that it sheds light on the understanding of storytelling as a way to transfer knowledge in a Malaysian organization. This study shows how other organisations are establishing its storytelling practice and in what way organisational stories are being used. This study explores the perception of storytelling as a knowledge transfer medium. This study makes attempt to identify the factors that influence the applicability of storytelling as part of the organization's knowledge transfer practices.

Literature Review

A great deal of research and literature has been dedicated to the role that storytelling plays in effective knowledge transfer. This can be seen from the work on the role of stories among disparate project members (Macleod & Davidson, 2007; Nielsen & Madsen, 2006), the role of stories in representing tacit knowledge (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006) and also the tools used to create and construct organisational stories (Santoro & Brezillon, 2005; Appan et al 2004).

Storytelling in KM is used as a technique to describe complex issues, explain events, understand difficult changes, present other perspectives, make connections and communicate experience. Stories are useful in knowledge management because people learn things easily from stories which make it capable of externalizing tacit knowledge (LeBlanc & Hogg, 2006). Storytelling in knowledge management context is seen as a powerful management tool to communicate tacit knowledge in organisation. Bailey (2005) cited Larry Prusak, the founder of and executive director of the Institute of Knowledge Management, keynote address at a national conference on knowledge management in the United States where he distilled what was important about knowledge management in a single word: storytelling. Prusak also said that knowledge is not in a database and it is not in computer applications but it is in our stories. The act of telling stories is deemed ancient. Storytelling is considered as an old skill but in a new

context: Knowledge Management (KM) (Snowden, 1999). Storytelling in knowledge management is used as a technique to describe complex issues (Post, 2002), explain events (Boje, 1991), understand difficult changes (Boje, 1991), present other perspectives (Boyce, 1996), make connections (Wetlauffer-AdCock, 2004) and communicate experience (Sole, 2002; Boyce, 1996; Wetlauffer-AdCock, 2004; Reilly et al, 1998).

Knowledge Transfer

As storytelling approach is widely used to communicate experience and transferring tacit knowledge, it is important to consider the literature on knowledge transfer. Davenport and Prusak (2000) provide the complete definition of knowledge transfer. They state that the transfer of knowledge involves both the transmission of information to a recipient and absorption and transformation by that person or group. This indicates that knowledge transfer is not about transferring knowledge alone, it involves the absorption of the knowledge by the recipient and use that knowledge to the recipient's benefits.

In reality, distribution and sharing of knowledge is not an easy task (Davenport, 1994). Knowledge transfer is one of the three main components of knowledge management (Davenport and Prusak, 2000). Knowledge transfer is more complex because (1) knowledge resides in organizational members, tools, tasks, and their sub-networks (Argote & Ingram, 2000) and (2) much knowledge in organizations is tacit or hard to articulate (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Factors Influencing Knowledge Transfer

Many studies have been conducted on factors that influencing knowledge transfer. However, most of the factors mentioned are broad and not associated to any particular knowledge transfer methods.

Joshi & Sarker (2006) conducted a study that examines the factors associated with knowledge transfer in information system development project teams. The study focuses on the team member's absorptive capacity, motivation, communication among members, group culture and group cohesion on knowledge transfer. The findings of the study indicate that an individual is able to internalize significant amount of transferred knowledge if the knowledge source perceived the individual to have a high absorptive capacity, interacts extensively with other team members and belong to a collectivist team whose members have a high motivation to transfer knowledge.

Li & Zhu (2009) studies factors that influence informal knowledge transfer. They proposed that knowledge transfer opportunities, motives and capacity are the decisive influential factors to informal knowledge transfer among individuals. Knowledge transfer opportunities concerns with the difficulty degree of knowledge search and richness of channels, which provides the possibility of knowledge transfer among individuals. Knowledge transfer motives contain transfer willingness and reputation interests. Transfer willingness refers to the willingness of the knowledge source to transfer his or her knowledge to knowledge recipients. A person transfer knowledge for the sake of building his or her reputation. The knowledge source does not only enhance recipients' capability of solving problems but also obtain admiration from others. Knowledge transfer capacity contains absorptive capacity and imparting capacity. Absorptive capacity refers to the personal ability to distinguish knowledge value, get external information, digest and then make use of knowledge. The ability of knowledge source to transfer and express knowledge and how to carry out effective knowledge transfer refers to imparting capacity.

Hashim and Othman (2005) cited from the following authors on the four factors that influence knowledge transfer from organizational perspectives. They include:

- Relational channel (Rulke et al, 2000) Relational channels provide the human-to-human connection necessary to support the transfer of tacit knowledge.
- Partner similarity (Almeida et al, 1999; Darr et al, 2000). This refers to the similarity that exists between knowledge giver and receiver. People with similar backgrounds, levels and experiences.
- Organizational self-knowledge (Rulke et al, 2000) Individuals know what they know and also know what other people knows.
- Divergence of interest (Alchian et al, 1972; Jensen et al, 1976). The divergence of interest between sender and receiver can inhibit knowledge transfer.

Research Method

A small scale case study was conducted to gain insights on the practice of telling organization stories. Given the context, motivation and nature of the study, it is appropriate to use qualitative case study as the research approach (Yin, 2002). This study uses a case study approach to investigate employees' understanding of the using stories as a knowledge transfer tool and the perception of the employees on the facilitators and barriers of deploying storytelling approach in the organization.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews. Semi structured interviews are used to gather data on the storytelling practices in the organization and employees' perception on storytelling. The data is analysed to look for emerging themes using the research software NVivo. In, thematic analysis the data collection and analysis are done simultaneously and the researcher going through back and forth between transcripts, memos, notes and the research literature (Tere, 2006). After the interviews have been transcribed, the data are then coded into patterns. At the next level, the themes are then grouped together patterns into sub themes. The themes emerged are then being referred back to literature to obtain a valid argument for choosing those themes (Tere, 2006).

Results

Participant Summary

Respondents were selected from IT-related departments in a private university fully-owned by Malaysia's oil and gas company. The respondents came from Information Technology and Media Services (ITMS) department and Computer and Information Science (CIS) department. Table 1 shows the summary of the respondent.

Table 1: Respondent Summary

Resp No.	Position (Years of Experience)	Department	Job Scope	Knowledge Used in Job
R1	Executive (3 years)	ITMS (User Support Unit)	Responsible in supporting users with IT facilities such as computers and maintaining server for ID for email and network.	Technical-Explicit and Tacit knowledge
R2	Executive (10 years)	ITMS (Application Unit)	Manages a IT project in the organization	Explicit and Tacit knowledge
R3	Executive (6 years)	ITMS (Network Unit)	Responsible in the design and managing the university's network.	Tacit knowledge
R4	Technician (8 years)	ITMS (User Support Unit)	Responsible in managing the lab and ensure equipment are in order.	Tacit knowledge
R5	Technician (10 years)	ITMS (User Support Unit)	Attached to the Support Unit. Responsible in supporting end user server.	Tacit knowledge
R6	Lecturer (3 years)	CIS	Lectures Programming subjects. Conduct research	Explicit knowledge
R7	Lecturer (3 years)	CIS	Handles Final Year Project course. Conduct research	Explicit and Tacit knowledge

The Themes Concerning the Usage of Stories in the Organization

Amid the lack of formal platform in the organization, stories were used for various purposes in the organization through its informal channel. Even though the focus of the study is on the usage of stories in transferring knowledge, it was found that stories are not mainly used knowledge transfer alone. With regards to the use of stories in the organization, the data analysis has yielded four major themes: Experience sharing, Immediate Response, Mental Model and Shared Understanding. These themes can be plotted in a checklist matrix as presented in Table 2.

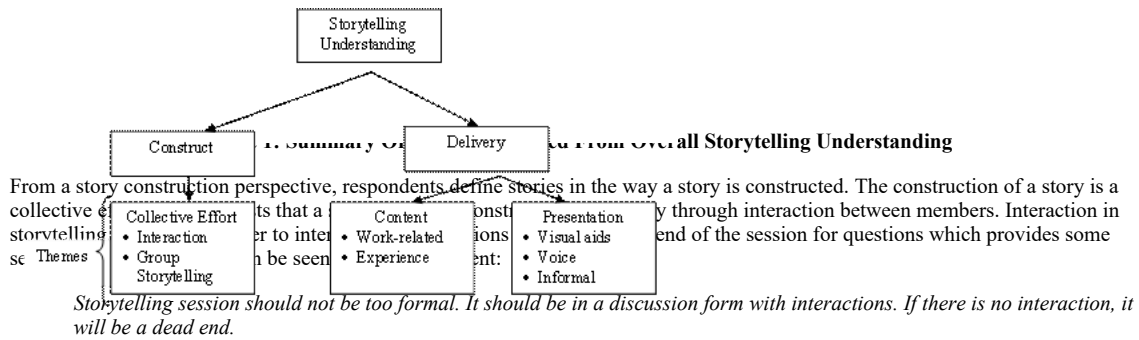
Table 2: Checklist Matrix On The Usage Of Stories

Respondent	Experience sharing	Immediate response	Shared understanding	Mental model
R1	X			
R2	X			
R3	X	X		
R4	X	X	X	
R5	X			
R6				X
R7	X			

The primary usage of stories in the organization is to share experience among colleagues. In the workplace, job description, manuals or policies in document form are deemed to be inadequate in providing the details. The tacit part of the job is conveyed through stories thus making it the primary purpose of using stories. R1 and R7 for example, learn how to provide perform their job better through stories shared by their predecessor. R1 who is in charge of the User Support unit of ITMS learned how to manage users in the organization who comes from various background and culture. R7 who is a lecturer handling undergraduate's final year project learned from her predecessor on how to manage the tasks effectively. R3 and R4 prefer to use stories because stories are not only used to share stories but it is also a means where immediate response can be obtained. This indicates the process of telling stories as a two-way communication in which stories are exchanged and constructed collectively. R3 implies that he prefer stories to be shared in an informal settings where responses can be obtained immediately. Toolbox session is an example of storytelling platform in which stories are used to share experience and able to obtain immediate response.

The Themes Emerged From their Overall Understanding of Storytelling

Data was also collected on the respondents general understanding of what organization storytelling should be. As shown in Figure 1, the responses from the respondents indicate that storytelling can be seen from a story construction and story delivery point of view.



In organization storytelling, it is important that the teller and listener interact to construct the stories ensure that shared meaning and understanding are established (Santoro & Brezillon, 2005; Valle et al, 2002). In the organization, the Toolbox session provides the opportunity of group storytelling.

Other themes that emerged are content and presentation which denotes story delivery standpoint. While organization stories can be used for many purposes, the content of a story should reflect practice-based about work experience. The content should be presented informally and possessing characteristics such as gestures, high and low peak, voice tone and many others with the help of visual aids.

The content must be presented in Powerpoint but the explanation should be informal like one presenter when he talked about his experience in getting a PhD scholarship grant ...u know that day, I applied bla bla.....

A respondent provides the following statement that summarized of what a story should be like that demonstrate the general understanding of stories and storytelling:

A story must have pictures. When you tell it must be with expression. Must have visual aids and then make it interesting too tell. If not people will not be interested to tell. If tell the stories in a monotone voice, it will not be interesting. That is storytelling in general. Storytelling is just telling stories. Telling what you know to people. Chatting with colleagues is storytelling. When stories are told, there might be knowledge that is transferred to you. We share opinions and ideas within that storytelling session. It is one to one. Even if we chat with our boss, it can be storytelling. We tell the boss our problems and boss can give solutions.

The Themes Emerged on Storytelling Factors

Figure 2 visualize the themes emerged in this influential factors category. The themes are Comfortability, Story content and Knowledge transfer issues.

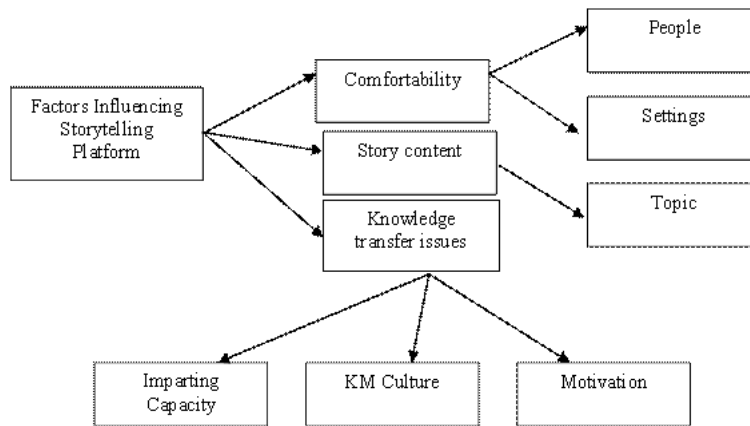


Figure 2: Summary Of Themes Emerged From Influential Factors

Comfortability

As depicted in Figure 2, the themes emerged in informal platform are comfortability and low knowledge management culture. In order to promote storytelling, the environment in which storytelling happens is important. Respondents indicate comfortability as one of the factors that could influence the practice of telling stories. Comfortability in this context refers to the comfortability of the person towards the other people that he or she is engaging in storytelling with and the environment of which storytelling happens. Comfortability with another person relates to trust. In knowledge transfer literature, trust is cited as one of the factors that influence knowledge transfer (Rhodes et al, 2008; Dahlan et al, 2005; Bechina, 2006; Fengjie et al, 2004). This reflected in the statements,

I might share with people that don't know yet. So, I'd rather share with someone that I'm close with and definitely know that the person don't know about it yet. I'm quite selective in sharing.

Knowledge sharing story?....No. I believe people in this department work in silos. And if they share they share among the colleagues that they are close to....

The environment in which storytelling happens is also another factor that facilitates the use of stories. The term 'informal' is being used widely by participants to illustrate the suitable type of storytelling settings. Examples of informal settings are stories exchanged during breakfast and lunch or other social platforms such as department gatherings or tea talk. Storytelling also happen in formal settings such as departmental meetings but departmental meetings have minutes that need to be adhered and decision that needs to make which gives limited amount of space for storytelling.

We have lots of formal meetings but formal meetings are mostly straight to the point. You have to give decision at that time. When there are problems to be discussed, a solution is required straight away. In informal sessions, when we tell problems, the solutions are given in the form of other member's experience.

I think it (storytelling session) must be informal...maybe with food <laugh>people may be there. Food brings people in. I think the session should short and concise.

Even though respondents acknowledge that sharing knowledge is important and beneficial but with the inexistence of KM practices and culture in the organization has caused knowledge and experience to remain circulated and eventually lost. The culture of managing personal knowledge and willingness to transfer knowledge is not fully understood.

I think one reason why knowledge is not captured is because the person is always there with you. If you need something, you will just dial or email and I'll get the solution. No one actually put the initiative like to record it because like for me, I am here. If the person needs me, they can find for me. I think the problem is not recorded because it is not part of the work process. If I have to do step 1 to step 10, and that thing falls under step 8, I'll record it. But the step is not there.

Knowledge Transfer Issues

Motivation, imparting capacity and low awareness are factors in knowledge transfer issues. There is low awareness on the importance of sharing knowledge in the organization. The low awareness has led to the storytelling session as being unimportant. This can be seen from the statement,

We used to organized a session last time after Friday prayers one hour where we would gather in the auditorium we talked about whatever happens in the department but it does not work because people won't take it seriously. They feel that it is a waste of time to come and chat. People won't respond to that session.

Imparting capacity refers to the ability of knowledge source to transfer and express knowledge and how to carry out effective knowledge transfer (Li & Zhu, 2009). It is an acceptable fact that there are people who are not able to speak in public which could affect the delivery of the story. Imparting capacity could also affect the motivation of employees to become storytellers. Another perspective to look at motivation is that employees give excuses for not attending the session.

What benefit would they get in attending that session? If it is not in their KPI or the boss isn't aware of their attendance, it will be difficult to get participation. Unless, they know by doing this, I'll get something. They want something tangible like KPI.

We need to compile the reasons why they can't come to the session. The thing is they gave lots of excuses. They will give excuses like the venue is far, the story is not interesting, they'll get bored if listen to the story, there is no refreshment....

Content

Another theme emerged that have caused unsuccessful formal storytelling effort is content applicability and topic applicability. The respondents commented that the topic should be made interesting and related to the audience. The topic of the story is the first contact with prospective audience. Audience might decide not to attend the storytelling session if the topic does not sound appealing to them. The respondents highlighted that the content of the story should be work-related, based on a person's experience and original. Original in this context means that the story has not been told to anybody or that the majority of the people have not heard of it. The topic and content applicability supports the divergence of interest factor of knowledge transfer (Alchian et al, 1972;Jensen et al, 1976 cited in Halim & Othman, 2005) which states that people will only transfer knowledge if people share the same interest. This also implies that the topic and content should be applicable to the audience. One of the advantages of telling stories is that people can relate to the story and make sense of any events that happened in the audience. Table 3 shows the elements within the topic and content theme for the use of stories in formal storytelling platform.

Table 3: Topic And Content Applicability Themes Summary

Theme	Element	Statement
Topic Applicability	Applicability to audience	<i>I think the topic needs to be interesting that ..addresses to certain group...Your topic depends on who are your target audience...topic must be applicable to your audience.</i> <i>I guess it depends on what topic to be shared and my needs at that point of time and what I think might be</i>

		<p><i>useful for me in the future.</i></p> <p><i>The attendance of the session depends on the topic. The topic gives purpose and objectives. If there is no benefit, then people will not come.</i></p> <p><i>It is not about the KPI but it is about whether the topic is applicable to their work.</i></p>
Content Applicability	Experience	<i>Stories about my experience because the most popular topic here is about your experience.</i>
	Work-related	<p><i>Content is important because the content must relate to work and it is fresh.</i></p> <p><i>Stories about what is interesting working here. People might also be interested in what happened in my previous employment.</i></p>
	Original	<p><i>Content is equally important. It is actually how we present the content especially on matters that we don't know about.</i></p> <p><i>The content should be like what other people don't know but you know.</i></p> <p><i>If the content of the story is something that people have not heard, people will come to the session.</i></p>

Discussion

The focus of this study is to explore the usage of stories with the focus of transferring knowledge in mind. However, it can be seen that stories are not used for knowledge sharing alone. While its main objective is to share knowledge, stories are also used to prompt immediate response (Sole, 2002), replace outdated mental model (Sole, 2002) and to create shared understanding among colleagues (Lehane et al, 2003; Nielsen & Madsen, 2006; Macleod & Davidson, 2007).

In general, the findings supported the literature. The respondents of this study acknowledged storytelling as an acceptable knowledge sharing tool but a low KM culture could be a barrier. Even with a strong social bonding but if the organization members are not aware of the importance of knowledge sharing, any knowledge sharing methods—including storytelling—will not work. The organization has conducted a number of knowledge sharing programs in which storytelling happens. However, some of the platforms failed. The platform most suitable for storytelling is informal platform but the problem with telling stories in an informal platform is that it is rarely captured if not never. In formal platform, the themes emerged from the study has caused the platforms to be discontinued. In order for a successful implementation of storytelling as a knowledge sharing approach, leadership support is crucial to create awareness of knowledge sharing benefits, to provide informal platform for more exchange of stories.

Li & Zhu (2009) and Rulke et al cited in Halim & Othman (2005) states that the knowledge transfer channels is a knowledge transfer influential factors. In the organization, the management has provided many knowledge transfer channels through the knowledge sharing formal and informal platforms such as the Buddy System and the Knowledge Sharing Session. All respondents were willing to transfer their knowledge using stories but it is unclear about respondents' expectation of gaining reputation by sharing stories. Respondents from the ITMS admitted that they have strong social bonding. However, the nature of their jobs, which required them to be out on the field, makes it difficult for them to interact extensively professionally (Joshi & Sarker, 2006). This is similar to CIS department where the staffs worked in silos. The consequences of this type of environment is that the organization members are unable to interact extensively thus causing them to be in a group of people who have low motivations to transfer knowledge. The findings also do not support the partner similarity factor (Almeida et al, 1999; Darr et al, 2000 cited in Hashim & Othman, 2005). While it is expected people to share stories with others who have similar backgrounds and experiences, it is trust that appears to be more prominent in influencing stories exchanges.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a social process endeavour. Therefore, storytelling in the organization occur everyday regardless of place and time. However, the main concern of this paper is the stories that are used for the purpose of knowledge transfer. In this paper, it is seen that stories are used mainly to share experience of other colleagues. Knowledge that is created based on experience is considered as an important asset to organization and storytelling is used mainly to share experience.

Knowledge sharing stories are constructed collectively through interactions between people. These interactions also help in filling in the gaps of the story. In order for the platforms to be successful, issues that need to be considered are the topic and content of the story. In the organization, the content of the story and the presentation should be appealing to the audience. Appealing in this context means that the content is relevant to the audience. In order for a story to be appealing, the content of the story should focus on work and also based on a person's experience. The settings in which a story is being presented should be informal. The use of visual aids and gestures are recommendable.

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