

Knowledge Sharing and Learning in Multiple Team Membership (MTM) Environments

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Employees in knowledge-intensive organizations, such as IT, healthcare, and automotive, are often asked to work on multiple teams concurrently, a situation referred to as Multiple Team Membership (MTM, O’Leary et al., 2011; Margolis, 2020). Besides optimizing resource utilization, organizations use MTM to encourage learning and knowledge sharing across teams (Bertolotti et al., 2015). Unfortunately, individuals working in multiple teams experience exhaustion and role overload (e.g., Berger and Bruch, 2021), which can hamper their ability to effectively share knowledge within their multiple teams or consolidate their learning across teams. For example, Brennecke and Rank (2016) found that in MTM environments, people face difficulties in providing knowledge to others. However, previous research has not explored how organizations can facilitate knowledge sharing and learning in these complex settings. Our study aims to understand how organizations can promote knowledge sharing and individual learning across teams when employees are simultaneously part of multiple teams.

A longstanding body of research underscores that sharing knowledge across groups is inherently challenging (e.g., Tagliaventi and Mattarelli, 2006). Two primary approaches to knowledge sharing have been investigated: structured and unstructured (e.g., Hansen et al., 1999; Haas and Hansen, 2007). In the structured approach, codified knowledge sharing is emphasized, where individuals participate in formal sessions or contribute to knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g., Di Vaio et al., 2021). In contrast, the unstructured approach focuses on tacit knowledge sharing, where individuals engage in knowledge exchange more informally and autonomously (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021). Both approaches have been found effective in fostering learning and

knowledge sharing (e.g., Gupta et al., 2009). However, in an MTM setting, where individuals must contribute to multiple teams, finding time for structured knowledge-sharing initiatives can be difficult, if not unfeasible. Additionally, employees in knowledge-intensive organizations, who often value independence and flexibility, may see structured initiatives as a threat to their unique professional identities, which are rooted in autonomy (e.g., Mattarelli et al., 2022). We thus propose that a structured knowledge-sharing approach is less effective for learning than an unstructured one, especially for individuals working on multiple project teams.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a field experiment within the R&D unit of a multinational IT organization developing security software. With top management support, we created two randomized treatment groups. In one group, employees from different teams were asked to participate in formally designed knowledge-sharing sessions (structured sessions). In the second group, employees were supported in self-organizing knowledge-sharing groups (unstructured sessions). Two waves of survey data collected before and after the implementation of knowledge-sharing sessions with 250 employees supported our hypothesis: structured knowledge-sharing sessions are less effective than unstructured ones, especially when individuals are part of multiple teams. Further analyses will explore how other factors moderate our results, including the content of the knowledge shared (e.g., entirely novel knowledge vs. incremental improvements) and the pattern of interactions during knowledge-sharing sessions.

We plan to present our preliminary results at the INGroup virtual conference to contribute to a better understanding of what affects learning and knowledge sharing in contemporary team-based workplaces.

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