Can Social Networking Improve Individual Competitiveness? Exploring the Effects of Social Network Centralities on Knowledge Acquisition and Work Efficiency in Organizational Work Teams

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of this study is to examine the influence of people’s social networking structures on the improvement of individual competitiveness within organizational work teams. This study utilizes a social network theoretical perspective to explain how two prominent properties of social networks, degree and betweenness centralities, could influence three crucial facets of individual competitiveness in the workplace: the quantity and quality of knowledge acquisition and work efficiency. This study contributes to current research on competitiveness by conceptualizing and empirically testing the relationship between work team members’ social networks and their competitiveness improvement in organizational work settings.

Keywords: Social networks, Network centralities, Knowledge acquisition, Work efficiency, Individual competitiveness

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed the increasing popularity of using social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter among people from all walks of life (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011). Meanwhile, organizational scholars and practitioners have started to recognize and embrace the hidden power of social networking in organizational practices (Contractor, Monge, & Leonardi, 2011). It is found that the traditional hierarchical organizational chart has become inadequate in capturing how information flows and how work actually gets done in today’s organizations (Cross & Borgatti, 2004). Instead, organizational employees are increasingly communicating, collaborating, and sharing critical information through informal and emergent social networks (Monge & Contractor, 2003). Despite the burgeoning popularity of studying organizational employees’ social networks, a crucial question remains unanswered in extant literature: can social networking really improve individual competitiveness in the workplace? To answer this question, this study seeks to utilize a social network theoretical perspective to examine the effects of organizational work team members’ social networking structures on three crucial facets of individual competitiveness: knowledge acquisition (the quantity and quality of information acquired) and work efficiency. Specifically, this study focuses on testing the influence of two prominent properties of social networks, degree and betweenness centralities, on team members’ competitive behaviors. The findings from this study will not only enrich current research on the relationship between social networking and individual competitiveness enhancement, but also provide insights for practitioners who hope to unearth the hidden power of social networking in today’s workplaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Theoretical Perspective of Social Networks

A thriving approach to studying how organizational work team members communicate and collaborate with each other is the social network theoretical perspective (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Monge & Contractor, 2003). A social network is defined as of a