

# A DISSENSUS-BASED ALIGNMENT PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND THE AMBIVALENCE BETWEEN AND WITHIN MANAGEMENT AND KNOWLEDGE WORKER

การศึกษาถึงความเห็นที่ขัดแย้งที่ไม่สอดคล้องกันในแนวทางเดียวกัน ระหว่างระดับการบริหารจัดการและความรู้ของพนักงาน

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## Abstract

If the purpose of introducing the concept of power to knowledge management is to as much as possible reflect the nature of conflict within knowledge related activities, the ambivalence within management and employee should also be taken into account. However, in fact, the mainstream knowledge management literature still focuses on a consensus-based perspective on understanding the relationship between management and employees in knowledge processes. Only a few of works consider the contradictory relationship between management and employees in knowledge processes, but they are a lack of recognition of that the nature of conflict not only exists between management and employees, but also within management and individual employee. Thus, this paper is, through empirically studying how software programmers understand knowledge-related activities embedded in their daily work, to reflect the dissensus-based alignment relationship between and within management and employees. A qualitative research method was adopted to collect the data. A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis. The finding points to the knowledge activities are the outcome of an ongoing process of conflict, negotiation, compromise and cooperation between and within management and programmers as work is delivered in a way that is acceptable for both sets of participants.

**Keywords:** ambivalence within management and employee, dissensus-based alignment relationship, knowledge activities

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## บทคัดย่อ

หากวัตถุประสงค์ของหลักการการแนะนำแนวคิดของการมีพลังอำนาจในการจัดการองค์ความรู้ให้มากที่สุด เท่าที่จะเป็นไปได้ การสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความขัดแย้งโดยธรรมชาติที่มีความเกี่ยวข้องสัมพันธ์ในความรู้ ข้อด้วย ระหว่างระดับการจัดการและระดับพนักงานควรนำมาใช้ในการพิจารณาศึกษาด้วย อย่างไรก็ตาม ในความเป็นจริง วรรณกรรมด้านการจัดการความรู้ยังคงมุ่งเน้นไปที่มุ่งมองแนวความคิดที่ออกแบบเป็นอันทามตีในการเข้าใจความสัมพันธ์ ของกระบวนการความรู้ระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการและระดับพนักงานจากการเพียงไม่กี่ชั้น สามารถพิจารณาให้เห็น ถึงข้อด้วยความคิดเห็นที่เกิดขึ้นระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการและระดับพนักงานในกระบวนการความรู้ที่เกิดขึ้น แต่พนักงานทั้งสองระดับยังคงไม่ตระหนักถึงการรับรู้ของความขัดแย้งโดยธรรมชาติซึ่งไม่ได้มีเพียงระหว่างระดับบริหาร จัดการกับระดับพนักงานเท่านั้น แต่ยังรวมถึงระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการ กับระดับพนักงานแบบปัจเจกบุคคลด้วย การศึกษานี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพโดยใช้วิธีการเก็บข้อมูลจากกลุ่มตัวอย่างโดยคัดเลือกกลุ่มตัวอย่างจำนวน 27 คน โดยใช้วิธีสัมภาษณ์แบบดัวต่อตัว ดังนั้น บทความนี้ เป็นการศึกษาจากการสังเกตกลุ่มตัวอย่างที่ประกอบอาชีพในสายงาน โปรแกรมเมอร์ ว่ามีความเข้าใจในความรู้ ความสัมพันธ์ในการทำงานประจำอย่างไร โดยสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงความสัมพันธ์ ของแนวความคิดที่ไม่สอดคล้องกันไปในแนวทางเดียวกันระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการ และระดับพนักงาน สิ่งที่ได้ จากการศึกษานี้ คือ การแสดงให้เห็นถึงกระบวนการของความขัดแย้ง การเจรจาต่อรอง การประนีประนอม และ ความร่วมมือระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการ และโปรแกรมเมอร์ ในการหาแนวทางในการทำงานร่วมกัน

**คำสำคัญ:** ข้อด้วยความเห็นที่ไม่ตรงกันระหว่างระดับบริหารจัดการและระดับพนักงาน ความสัมพันธ์ในการจัดการ ข้อคิดเห็นแนวคิดที่ไม่ออกแบบเป็นอันทามติ กิจกรรมด้านความรู้

## Introduction

“When the physical toil of manufacturing is being replaced by a world where we work more with our heads than our hands” (Sewell, 2005: 685), is control still the same meaning as it used to be – management gives orders and workers obeys, and workers are placed in subordinate position to management? The answer of this paper for this question tends to be negative. It is that, the conflict between management and knowledge workers is an integral part which influences how organisational knowledge activities are conducted. The worlds of work today are not an outcome of unconditional consensus but an ongoing process of conflict between and within two parties.

Although the mainstream of knowledge management research has been focused on a consensus-based perspective which explains the relationship between management and workers in knowledge processes in terms of a harmonious relation and common goal (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown & Duguid, 1991), there has also been growing interest in the roles that how the control is resisted by organisational workers in knowledge processes can also play in shaping those processes. This perspective understands the relationship between management and workers in knowledge processes in accordance with a dissensus-based understanding (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Schultze & Stabell, 2004). However, comparing to the rich

empirical studies of the consensus-based perspective on understanding the relationship between management and workers in knowledge processes, the study of the dissensus-based perspective is relatively scarce. The study of the nature of conflict exists within management and individual employee is even barely to see.

Thus, the aim of this paper is, through an empirical study of tensions both between and within management and knowledge workers, to reflect the dissensus-based alignment relationship within knowledge processes. The finding argues that the relationship between management and knowledge workers is not always based on the unconditional consensus or the absolute antagonism, but it is in a middle ground which is occasionally characterized by absolute conflict, at other times, a very clear cooperation and compromise exists between management and workers due to a clear shared benefit.

This paper is organized as follows: we start with an overview of both consensus-based and dissensus-based perspectives in understanding organizational knowledge management activities. After a short note on methodology, the findings are described and interpreted. The ambivalence between and within management and knowledge workers are analyzed and discussed. This paper concludes with an argument that the knowledge activities are the outcome of an ongoing process of conflict, negotiation, compromise and cooperation between and within management and knowledge workers as work is delivered in a way that is acceptable

for both sets of participants.

### **Consensus-based perspective and dissensus-based perspective**

Knowledge has become the watchword of contemporary organisations, and research interest in knowledge, knowledge-based organisations and knowledge management has accelerated (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Tsoukas, 1996; Orlikowski, 2002; Newell et al., 2009; Lilley et al., 2004). Two distinctive understandings of knowledge, characterised by an entitative perspective on the one hand and a processual perspective on the other have dominated the key debate in the knowledge management literature, which often seeks to instrumentalise understandings of knowledge to facilitate apparent enhancement of knowledge management practices.

However, these two perspectives have been criticized by some researchers due to their apparent deliberate focus on a consensus-based orientation to knowledge processes in organisations which can result in an overlooking of dissensus-based aspects of those selfsame processes (Contu & Willmott, 2003; Schultze & Stabell, 2004). In other words, the two epistemological perspectives, based on a consensus-based orientation, both assume harmonious social relations, shared interests and communal goals with regard to the social order (Wenger, 1998). Such conceptualizations approach knowledge processes in ways that tend to imply coherence and consensus in organisational knowledge management practices.

However, some researchers argue that organisational knowledge processes also produce conflict between workers and management which is an unavoidable element of such processes in hierarchical enterprises (Pfeffer, 1992; Hales, 1993; Hislop, 2009; Karreman, 2010). In this perspective, societies and organisations are made up of groups whose interests are often oppositional and conflicting, and power is unevenly distributed. Thus, in fully considering how power and politics link to knowledge processes in organisations, it is necessary to also make the use of a dissensus-based perspective on social order which assumes that antagonistic relations are an inherent feature of social dynamics, at least in contemporary circumstances. Following this argument, organisational attempts to manage workers' knowledge is seen as an effort to try to serve managerial and shareholder own interest via the possession of all knowledge relevant to the labour process. On the other hand, knowledge workers tend also to be seen as pursuing a high degree of autonomy and professional freedom and thus as almost essentially ill disposed to accept such control (Drucker, 1993). Thus, workers and management are seen as two polarities of conflict. Their interest in knowledge processes is not consensual and harmonious but contradictory and opposite. As Contu and Willmott (2003) argue, the contradiction between workers and their employer is inevitable.

However, even though the contradiction is inevitable, it does not mean that the contradic-

tion always leads to conflict and antagonism. In order to deliver the work in ways which both parties accept, the compromise and collaboration between management and workers are very necessary and essential. As a result, management and workers, they not only need to adjust themselves to adapt each other, but they also need to adjust themselves to adapt themselves.

But, the fact is that most of the empirical research in the existing knowledge management literature focuses on the consensus-based perspective to see organisational knowledge activities and a few works touches the field of dissensus-based understanding of organisational knowledge activities. However, there is relevant silence on a dissensus-based alignment perspective to empirically investigate how employees understand knowledge activities in their daily work, by conducting a fine-grained field study with software programmers who work across a range of organisations.

The detailed description of methodology is presented in the following section.

## Research methods

This paper is based on an empirical study of software programmers who work across a range of organisations in both China and UK. The semi-structured interview was adopted as the data collection method. A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis. The interviews lasted between one hour and 90 minutes and were recorded, with respondent permission.

In addition, given the purpose of this research is to explore relevant issues from the perspective of employees, I chose not to invite managerial participants as gatekeepers so as to avoid them consciously or unconsciously selecting people who they think will give a good account of the company. Thus, a mixture of sampling techniques including purposive, convenience and snowball were adopted to expand my network and trace targets who 'hide' in the wider population (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders et al., 2012). All data is analysed by me reading the transcripts again and again to understand the meaning of data, and grouping component parts into different categories which seem to indicate potential thematic relationships. In this way, the data can be displayed in a more clear and systematic form which helps my understanding of rich and complex points of view and addresses my research question.

The findings and analysis are presented in the following section.

## Findings

Systematic codification and sharing of knowledge were identified in my data as one of main knowledge activities driven by management. Management encouraged their programmers to share knowledge and codified knowledge into organisational databases for convenient further reuse such as, technical frameworks, previous project proposals, product-related files, methodologies, and coding and comments and frequently-met problems and

solutions, and so forth. This knowledge not only can serve as a reference to offer guidance to identify new problems in forthcoming projects but also encompass previous technical models, codes and comments which can be modified to fit into the requirement of new products. As some programmers explained:

'Some of these previous codes, comments and methodologies may give you some ideas or clues for finding solutions for new problems. For example, you work on a new project and have got some problems that you have no idea where you should start. Looking at some similar project deliverables which had been done in the past may give you a clue about potential problematic areas and possible solutions for them so that you have something to start to work on.' (Xiaoai)

Apart from this codified knowledge, there was also a lot of knowledge kept in the heads of programmers, it was not easy to make accessible to others and difficult to codify in any form of tangible deliverable. It was tacit, context-specific and acquired by accumulation of years of experience. As Orlikowski (2002) says, it is a sort of capability of humans to know how to do things better without being capable of telling others how it works. For example:

'There is some knowledge which cannot be codified in databases or documents. It cannot even be clearly realised unless it is reflected in practice. It stems from many years' experience accumulation and is a

kind of ability of a person to see a big picture in the process of software development.' (Tom)

Thus, various management-driven sense and experience sharing mechanisms were employed by management to facilitate tacit knowledge dissemination among programmers. For example, training seminars were run to pass fundamental work-related knowledge to newcomers or less experienced programmers. And a kick-off project meeting was held at the initial stage of a project to clarify the client's requirements, product function and business background information. Regular meetings every week allowed members to report their progress and reflection meeting after projects led to sharing of backward-looking insights, summarising of valuable experiences and knowledge. Through the use of these management-driven knowledge management activities, organisations not only facilitated knowledge sharing among programmers but also made knowledge collective rather than a property of individuals.

However, this was only one side of what was happening in programmers' work. On the other side, knowledge in the tacit dimension is relatively ambiguous. What could be expressed and to what extent, in absence of an untied standard, depended on individuals' understanding of and willingness to engage in the processes involved. Moreover, many programmers considered that what they do to be just a job – finishing one project and moving on to the next one becoming a norm that they

expected to see repeated. They did not feel that part of their job responsibilities was to share knowledge. Thus, given economic interest, the ambiguous nature of knowledge and individual initiative to do otherwise, significant knowledge remained in people's heads.

### Interpretation

I have empirically displayed the activities of knowledge sharing and codification as they occur programmers' work and how the execution of these knowledge activities is influenced by both organizational and individual factors. Starbuck (1992) suggests that the key to successfully managing the work of knowledge workers is to keep a delicate balance between the degree of formalization necessary for coordinated action and the lower levels of formalization required to facilitate knowledge processes. This delicate balance is easy to articulate but difficult to manage due to the real tension between autonomy and control, which are not only caused by the contest between management and programmers but also by management's and programmers' own ambivalence towards knowledge management practice. For example, management and programmers on the one hand cooperate to support each other and actively take part in organizational knowledge processes, but on the other hand they continually conflict with each other and with themselves in order to protect their own interests in these knowledge processes. This phenomenon is not an outcome of unconditional consensus or absolute

antagonism but ongoing conflict, negotiation and compromise between and within two parties. As Contu and Willmott (2003) explains, management are the mediating agents of capital owners, where organisations are formed by demands to make profit, which requires managers to control and simultaneously cooperate with knowledge workers in order to turn their labor power into actual, productive work effort whilst maintaining an ability to continue to draw their creativity. At the same time, in order not to experience 'burn-out' as a result of perpetual attempts to simply 'do what is right' (Kunda, 1992) as well as to maintain a certain degree of compliance with management rules, workers continually adjust their behaviour in knowledge processes to maintain a sustainable balance. The findings above as evidence clearly reflect a dissensus-based alignment relationship between management and programmers.

### **Discussion: contradiction between management and programmers**

The findings and interpretation above highlight management's desire to eliminate the undisciplined and potentially risky exercise of initiative via a series of directive procedures to increase productivity. As Willmott (1993) emphasises, management is often concerned to promote a hegemonic form of control that works by standardising processes and inhibiting critical self-reflection and individual choice. For example, management set rules and protocols around coding and comment to standardise

programmers' work so as to maximise to avoid the emergence of mistakes in the operation of software and improve performance.

Furthermore, management used various formal mechanisms to capture, codify and synthesize knowledge stemming from the software development process and make it available for subsequent reuse by the organisation. Through codifying knowledge into databases, organisations could prevent important knowledge loss when experienced employees leave as well as enabling this existing codified knowledge to instruct their future projects (Hansen et al., 1999; Earl, 2001; Alvesson & Karreman, 2001).

However, the following of directive procedures in the delivery of work does not guarantee management and programmers share a common goal, interest and set of beliefs. It also does not mean that management has overall sway and has the superior power and can unilaterally control employees. According to Robertson and Swan (2003), the relatively stable set of hierarchically-based power relations between managers and those who are managed by them which leads to management's own superior bargaining power in negotiation may not necessarily hold in the context of knowledge-intensive working environments. It is because, on the one hand, programmers needed, to certain extent, to follow management's directive procedures and regulations, in order to deliver job security and the smooth completion of their work. But, on the other hand, in order to do their work better and deal with possible

unexpected situations in the everyday work, programmers had to conflict with managers' proceduralising of their work by developing innovative methods of programming or fixing problems. For example:

'Although company requires us to conduct manual testing on our own part of work before submitting for integration, we sometimes use automatic testing instead of manual testing in order to save time. Although manual testing is good in the most of situation, automatic testing can be better in certain circumstances.' (Ming)

'Company's coding and comment standards are the lowest risky way to complete work but may not be the most effective way. We sometimes have to adjust it a bit in order to adapt the requirement of practical situation, such as, simplifying some algorithm in coding so as to improve software operating speed.' (Xiaolong)

Thus, the knowledge activities in programmers' work are not like the shared, reproduced and communal outcomes of consensus described by Brown and Duguid (1991) and Lave and Wenger (1991) which delivers a sense of management giving orders and employees happily following them without bargaining. The relation between management and programmers in knowledge processes is a process of continual conflict, bargaining and compromise concession (Contu & Willmott, 2003). While management tries to increases control, employees also fight back often to realise other managerial imperatives that may conflict with the desire and

demand of knowledge management.

### **Discussion: management own ambivalence in knowledge management activities**

Apart from the conflict between management and programmers, contradiction was also identified in the management's own knowledge management activities. To elaborate, on the one hand, management actively set a series of knowledge management mechanisms in play to facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge codification. Management appeared to wish through using these management mechanisms to optimise knowledge processes, increase performance and prevent knowledge loss. But, on the other hand, manager's determination to promote these knowledge management activities in programmers' work is not always uppermost in their objectives – Neither is it consistently applied. On the contrary, one of the most common tensions reflected in my data is that management's wish to improve its knowledge management ability while also wishing to save the expense associated with the use of knowledge management activities. As a result of this ambivalence, management privilege some knowledge management activities over others in order to gain the benefit of managing knowledge as well as reducing financial expense and time-consumption. To sum up, management has its own ambivalence in conducting knowledge management activities. On the one hand, management wishes through using a series of formal knowledge management activities to facilitate knowledge sharing so as

to capture, codify and own programmers' knowledge. On the other hand, management is reluctant to spend too much financial resource and time on those knowledge activities which could not immediately generate benefits for project progress and enhancement of productivity. Therefore, management give priority to the implementation of some knowledge management activities than others to meet their own interest. Thus, no matter employees like or not, management would encourage knowledge activities as well as increase control to make organisational knowledge activities running in the way that benefits for management interest.

### **Discussion: programmers own ambivalence in organisational knowledge work**

The contradiction is not only identified in management's own knowledge management activities, but also is reflected in employees' own knowledge processes. To elaborate, on the one hand, employees are naturally uncomfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and are therefore susceptible to control in organisations because they need stability and security (Willmott, 1993). Thus, they wish that there are management procedures and regulations which they can follow to do things in the organisation so as to avoid making mistakes. At the same time, this following is not completely passive obeying order but active support in some sense. It is because that 'doing what is right' or keeping in line with management demand can also be beneficial

for employees' own interest.

On the other hand, just simply 'doing what is right' to fully comply with management demand is not fully consistent with programmers' own interest. For example:

'After all, this is a competitive world. If he really knows something which makes him so valuable and special for a company, I do not think that he is going to share it with others so easily.' (Xiaoyang)

In other words, the idea of protection of self-knowledge is inevitable. It seems to still be very difficult in real work environment to convert individually valuable knowledge into collective forms. This argument can be witnessed in that on the one hand, programmers claimed that if there was enough incentive, they could clarify what they knew in very detail. On the other hand, in order to protect their own interest and competitiveness in the organisation, they also attempted to blur the possibility of externalisation of their valuable knowledge by explaining:

'Some knowledge you cannot explain. It needs experience to understand and feel it.' (Chen)

'Even though our work (programming) is seen as quite standardized, there is still some flexibility there, which cannot be directly taught but needs programmers to experience it and learning by doing.' (Ben).

From these ambivalence and hesitated behaviours, we can see that programmers wish to gain more knowledge through engaging in organisational knowledge activities while they

are afraid of sharing too much knowledge which may lead to a threat to their own competitiveness in the organisation. As a result, programmers have to adjust their own behaviour and thought in organisational knowledge processes in order to keep a balance between what they can give and what they cannot, to what extent they can share and when they can share.

## Conclusion

The account of the dissensus-based perspective raises more questions about the harmonious and consensual relation between management and knowledge workers in the workplace and highlights contradictory and antagonistic relations are an inherent feature of social dynamics in the organisation (Hislop, 2009). In this perspective, power/knowledge is considered as important and necessary to be taken account of in examining the character and dynamics of organisational knowledge processes. The relationship between management and knowledge workers in organisational knowledge activities is not unconditional consensus but a process including conflict and anti-control. However, while the key dissensus-based debates in the knowledge management literature still focus on the contradiction between management and workers, a dissensus-based alignment relationship between management and workers has been overlooked. There seems little attention paid on how ambivalence within management and knowledge workers constitutes an integral part of the nature of negotiation and balance.

This paper highlights the ambivalence within management and knowledge workers in knowledge activities to expose the dissensus-based alignment relationship between managers and those who being managed. Through using fine-grained analysis of programmers' daily knowledge activities, this paper suggests that the ambivalence within management and programmers forms an integral part of workplace resistance. The character of this resistance is marked as a continual process of negotiation, bargaining and compromise and balancing between and within management and knowledge workers. This reflects that the power relation between management and programmers tends to be more balanced and neutralized rather than programmers are placed in typical subordinate position to management. This finding lays out an argument to the existing literature which emphasises that, within hierarchical organisation of employment relationship, workers are placed in a typically subordinate position to management. And suggests that, with significant amount of knowledge, knowledge workers are likely to be in a less subordinate position to management; they owned the power to protect their interest and balanced the degree of knowledge sharing – sharing while not sharing; as long as they kept up project progress and did not cause troubles in the delivery of work, management often unofficially tolerate programmers' discretion and accepted their negotiation and keeps the balance between powers.

It is my hope that the findings and analysis on the conflict, ambivalence, negotiation and

balance between and within management and knowledge workers in organisational knowledge activities can demonstrate that the resistance is the integral part of power relation influencing the outcome of organisational knowledge work. How managers and those who being managed adjust their own behavior in organisational working practices reflects how the power are

constituted and structured in the workplace. I hope that my work will stimulate others to rise to a challenge of showing more precisely and persuasively how organisational knowledge activities are a complex process, implicated in social structures involving relations of power and nature of resistance, negotiation, compromise and balance.

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