Does Performing Routine Task Prevent Creative Behaviour? A Review

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Abstract

Within a work system, once a task becomes routine, employees performing it may cease from making any judgment or decision to change the way of doing that task. Such behaviour may affect negatively on employees’ productivity. However, if employees were instructed to exercise judgment and decision-making with the purpose of being innovative they can enhance their productivity. This paper reviews previous studies to identify whether routinization hinders employees’ creativity.

Keywords: employees’ creativity, routinization, innovativeness, productivity

Introduction

A job can be divided into separate series of routine or repetitive tasks based on the job's standard and historical data. Studies have shown that a very large percentage of jobs (on some level) are fundamentally routine and repetitive (e.g office works, accounting, etc.). According to Nelson and Winter (1982) routines include organizations’ characteristics which include series of well-organized collective activities (routines) for creating things, hiring and implementing actions, ordering new inventories, speeding up manufacture of high ordered items, advertising, research and development programmes (R&D), new investment policies, and business strategies. These routines have a very critical role within an organization which is similar to that of genes in biological evolutionary theory. Routines also have functional or practical characteristics and have a very strong repositories role of knowledge and skills within an organization thus dubbed as the organizational memory (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Weichbrodt & Grote, 2010).

Rules and routines are two critical and necessary parts of organizational activities. They facilitate harmonization between organizational components and individuals by supporting and arranging goals and activities. They also can work as a direction and guidelines for individuals. Rules in work area help both organizations and individuals accomplish a job by decreasing uncertainty and doubt. On the other hand, rules and routines also have disadvantages (Weichbrodt & Grote, 2010). The most important disadvantage is too much routine requirements and strict rules can hinder innovation and changes, because most of the time they serve as an end for themselves. When tasks are highly routinized, the work can become boring and dissatisfying and the chances of making a mistake are more probable. In one hand, routines can hinder the level and amount of employees’ creativity and on the other, following the routines will not obstruct creativity (Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006; Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

Moreover, members’ memory within an organization can store much of the necessary knowledge (both tacit and explicit) to achieve organizational routines in “repertoires” or collection of required skills for a particular profession of knowledge. However, for members of the organization, the essential knowledge needed for their collaboration is more important than knowing what is in the collection. There is also the matter of knowing what routines to perform. It is required for individuals to have the ability to receive and understand a flow of incoming messages from other members and from the environment. Therefore, the routines can be considered as the memory about “what and how to do” not to hinder creativity (Moorman & Miner, 1997; Ohly et al., 2006). For instance, Ohly et al. (2006) described how routinization might be connected to creativity and innovation.

This study reviews previous literature on the relationship between routines (which include habits and rules) in daily tasks and creativity. It tries to answer the following question: Does performing routine tasks prevent creative behavior?

Routinization Defined

The concept of routinization as suggested by Ohly et al. (2006) refers to automaticity in behaviour. There are some disadvantages behind this automaticity which include lack of awareness and uncontrollability in decision making and/or changing the tasks’ technique. However, this automaticity can leads to expected productivity most of the time. Routinization develops among repeated implementation of behaviour or practicing a skill (Betsch, Haberstroh, Glöckner, Haar, & Fiedler, 2001).
Research on habits and routines give significant perceptions into the role of routinization in behaviour fields. In fact, routine is an ability to produce (collective) actions, to lead or guide a relating series of action that has been stored in some controlled or dispersed form. Routine may refer to a repetitive model of activity in a whole organization, ones’ ability and skill. It could also be as an adjective, to the smooth ordinary efficiency of such an individual or organizational performance (Nelson & Winter, 1982). This attribute refers to the routine’s aspect as the organizational memory, and expresses the routine’s cognitive and coordination dimension. Many organizations are following the specific routines and they are very successful, in fact, the key of their success refers to the fact of following the routines. According to Paoli and Prencipe (2001) routines represent the successful solutions to problems solved by the organization in the past, therefore when the organization faces with a same problem they are regained and performed.

Where do routines come from?

Routines are context-dependent (Cohendet & Llerena, 2001) and work environment, physical tools’ condition and exterior memories are three main environments which “context” includes. Implementation of routines can only be considered by the given context which supplies the natural area of attention for groups of action (Cohendet & Llerena, 2001). In fact the routines come from official rules. According to Weichbrodt and Grote (2010) official rules are usually put in place with the aim of producing or shaping organizational routines in terms of a group of activities. Rules have a critical role within all organizations because they provide several purposes and make the root of routines.

As has been mentioned, routines are known as organizational memory. Therefore it is obvious that knowledge of an organization is stored in an organization’s memory. However, the question is what and where is the organizational memory? According to Nelson and Winter (1982) during the routinization of activities (when organizational specific, active, and operational knowledge build) the most important and valuable storage has occurred. Similar to the way individuals remember their skills by exercising them; organizations also remember by doing and exercising a routine as much as possible.

Difference between rules and habits

In general, human decision-making or action is one of the possible situations in which habits and rules are valuable. Such habits and rules are beneficial in the perception that they help managers or even employees to decide, learn or act (Bamberg, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2003; Weichbrodt & Grote, 2010). Habits are a series of repeated and routine behaviour that are more or less self-actuating. Rules are a series of conditional, qualified or unqualified prototype of consideration or activities which can be adopted either deliberately or not. They are normally determined by a manager to inflict a certain order within the organization. Normally, rules have a structure, for instance, when performing an action in a particular situation; but, habits may have a different feature and quality. Following the rules is a deliberative and conscious action, but habitual action is typically instinctive. Basically rules do not have an autonomic feature. Moreover, breaking a rule is easier than changing a habit. Habits are self-actuating actions because they are based in subconscious areas of human nervous system that is why changing them is not easy. Nevertheless, same as rules; habits also have the same common form, for instance, individuals must still do a particular action in a particular situation.

Creativity

Creativity is the process of new ideas, services, invention, theory, and a solution to a problem (Adams, 2006; Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; DiLiello & Houghton, 2008). Employee creativity is the creation of new and potentially useful and valuable ideas for solving problems, generating new products, services, systems, work methods, processes, and so on. Employees are playing an important role within an organizational success, but their role is not only obtaining productivity goals, they need to produce and create new business ideas.

The componental model of creativity contains all factors that contribute to an individual creativity’s factors as well as work setting variables. One of the most important theories of creativity in terms of individuals and in organizations is the componental theory. This theory is serving as a fractional foundation for some other theories and for many experiential investigations. This theory was introduced by Amabile (1983) and has evolved into a complete model of the social and psychological parts which are essential for an individual to create creative work. In this theory, four components are essential for any creative reaction. Three of these four components are within the individual: 1) an intrinsic motivated person with 2) high area of expertise and 3) high skill in creative thinking. The fourth component placed outside the individual 4) the social environment in which the individual is working (Amabile, 1996; Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). Work in an environment with high support for creativity is a very important component as well. However, for situations in which doing routines and following rules are essential,
employees’ ability to be creative may be compromised. Therefore, the authors hypothesize that routinization has negative effects on individuals’ creativity and organizational innovation.

Discussion and Conclusion

There is a dichotomy in the way routinization influence creativity and innovation (Ohly et al., 2006). In one view, as said by Ford and Gioia (2000) routines and creative actions are seen as competitors. In another view, since routinization releases cognitive resources to think about other sides of work it is probably useful and valuable for creativity. Routine tasks are good for productivity because it saves time and energy. Many organizations and employees prefer to do routines due to their past achievements and successes, definiteness, and relative ease. But the question is how can employees be more enthusiastic and to be creative in work setting? Can the work environment make them more creative? These are the open areas of work in future studies.

As has been mentioned, the most important problem with routinization is in its excessiveness. Too much routine requirements hinder changes and the ability to be creative thus affecting overall innovativeness. Because routines have an expected end, this means that most of the time following routines have to end in specific place. However, if tasks become highly routinized, the work can become monotonous and dull and the probability of making mistakes is higher. Often changes within the organization or in its environment render some rules ineffective. Therefore, since rules by definition limit many actions (e.g. freedom), they are often unpopular in organizations which strive for innovation.

Employees placed in traditional productivity driven organisations with formal structures, limitation on time, strict and inflexible rule and systems, similar and routine daily tasks, standardised workplaces may not be motivated to display creative behaviour. The situation in which a person generates new, useful, and valuable ideas depends on the support that is received from the organization or work environment (Amabile, 1996). The fact is that one’s creativity does not merely depend on their individual characteristics. Instead, their work environment and human resource practices also have significant role to promote or hinder creativity. Enhancing and promoting creativity is also dependant on social-organizational work environment by providing an appropriate job design systems (Dul, Ceylan, & Jaspers, 2011).

One benefit of routine as a cognitive mechanism is economizing the rare information processing, and the capacity of managers’ decision-making (Betsch et al., 2001; Cohendet & Llerena, 2001). Some cognitive resources such as attention being limited and rare, routines as attention-focussing devices economize on limited cognitive resources in order to "free-up higher degrees of awareness, mental deliberation and decision making for the more complex decision" (Hodgson, 1997). In fact while doing routines leads to successful performance, therefore repeating the same process of success is reasonable and needed which is called successful routine. However, a failure routine needs changes and this changing needs creativity. Successful routines should also involve creativity because after a while the process needs some changes for reducing the chance of failure. It is very important to choose different processes in performing tasks because it will reduce the development of routines.

Nevertheless, innovative activities and a large amount of business activities are not essentially counted as routines. Such changeable and uncertain activities were accommodated in Nelson and Winter (1982)’s evolutionary theory. They identified that there are irregular and unpredictable aspects in the purpose of decisions and its outcomes.

References


