

# Work Tribes Present an Opportunity for Firms in Knowledge Management Systems

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## ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of work tribes is discussed widely in trade publications but is missing from scholarly research. A work tribe exists where people in the same job role demonstrate shared life experiences outside the work environment, loyalty to others in the work group regardless of social connection, and security or protection within the work group. The existence of work tribes is largely considered a positive force for companies to promote community at work. This chapter introduces a crossroads of social groups and work tribes that cause an opportunity for firms to identify and understand how the work tribe plays a role in the knowledge management system. A case study of flight attendants with a U.S.-based international carrier provides a practical example of how firms can learn from work tribes.*

*Understanding work tribes enables a company to identify the factors that impact knowledge management systems so companies can empower work tribes to propel knowledge forward.*

Keywords: Social Group, Learning, Inter-group, Culture, Group Dynamics, Social Identity, Belonging, Protection, Community of Practice

## INTRODUCTION

Academic research has failed to investigate and codify the concept of *work tribes*, which is discussed and studied within the practice of culture and knowledge management systems at companies and in trade publications. A work tribe is a collection of people associated through a job role where loyalty, security, and shared life experiences supersede job, company, and social connection. Work tribes are connected by occupational affiliation rather than through physical meeting, company affiliation, or geographic footprint. The work tribe goes beyond the connection and relationships of a typical work team because work tribes are not dependent upon social connections. The work tribe is identified as having a level of loyalty and membership that does not require 1:1 social interaction, where members are connected through association to the tribe itself, rather than connection to each other.

This chapter investigates work tribes, the practical impact of work tribes on knowledge management systems, and the implication to further research work tribes. The study of work tribes within knowledge

management systems benefits companies so they better understand how to align the values and goals of the knowledge management system with those of the work tribe to maximize outcomes.

Work tribes exist beyond the spectrum of work teams because of the increased identity, security, and support. Flight attendants are one example of a work tribe. Flight Attendants are present on aircraft with a primary job responsibility of safety and the comfort of passengers (BLS, 2021). The flight attendant population is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and highly unionized, with the largest union the Association of Flight Attendants representing roughly 50,000 of the almost 250,000 flight attendants in the United States. The large level of oversight and demand for safety upon aircraft make the flight attendant a unique job role to study in knowledge management systems. The success of knowledge transfer to ensure both the safety of passengers and flight crew create a knowledge management system that, if it fails, can be a life-or-death situation.

The flight attendants are a classification of workers like EMS, police, floor nurses, etc., where their job demands force changes in lifestyle that are reflected outside of the workplace. Flight attendants work in a role with changing schedules, unpredictable destinations, and new/unknown coworkers daily.

## **BACKGROUND**

Knowledge management systems exist within the broad context of human and social interaction. Knowledge is social in nature, and knowledge management systems are studied through the context of group dynamics, social groups, and Communities of Practice (COP). Research highlights the positive impact of social constructs within the company's knowledge management system without preparing companies for the downside of social relationships in knowledge management systems. According to the literature, strong knowledge management system adoption is strengthened in the presence of positive work culture, trust in leadership, social identity, group learning, strong inter-group identity, social category, and support from colleagues (Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Huang, 2009; Liu et al., 2020; Zarraga & Boanche, 2005).

Work tribes like other groups and social systems are a benefit to knowledge management systems, as they encourage workers to comply with the practices of the tribe itself. However, understanding how work tribes impact knowledge management systems requires a definition of work tribes and academic, peer-reviewed research to identify when and where work tribes happen and how they might influence knowledge management systems.

### **Social Categorization and Social Groups**

The study of groups and the social nature of individuals is critical to understanding work tribes. Tajfel's research in the 1970s and 1980s focused on social categorization. Tajfel defines social categorization as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership" (1972, p. 292). Tajfel's research evolved in the 1980s to include social identification as a cognitive relationship to groups rather than a physical one. Turner and Tajfel find that group belonging is not dependent upon interaction; membership is based on knowledge of belonging to the same social category which drives behavior rather than social pressures or followership determining group behavior (1982).

While the research of social groups was prevalent for three decades, it was not until 2000 that Hogg and Terry linked social identification and social categorization finding phenomenon exists within social categories that drive behaviors in organizations. Their research provides a milestone for social research as it is investigated in relation to work behaviors and knowledge management in firms.

## **Social Identification Model**

While there is research that links social identity as a factor in knowledge management and knowledge transfer, it is not thoroughly studied. Social Identity can be defined as the feeling of belonging to a social group (Schutte & Barkhuizen, 2015, p.130-131). Kane, Argote, and Levine (2005, p. 57) state, “when individuals identify with or are categorized as members of a social aggregate, they are more likely to define themselves in terms of their membership in that group.” They also state that when members of a group share a social identity, they feel more comfortable disseminating information with the members of their group.

Although social identity is defined by the common characteristics that a group of people share, the term “work tribes” takes the social identity theory to another level. Not only does it consider the social aspects of a group, but it also considers work dynamics, the effects of the work (whether that be physical, emotional, or mental) on the people, and common behaviors. Work is such a large component of people’s lives that it tends to dominate the social aspects of their lives and can in turn, become a large part of their social life as well as their social identity. Because “work tribes” encompasses social identity and it can be expected to have an impact on knowledge management and sharing as well. In fact, organizational knowledge sharing is motivated by several factors including its use for validating information being spread throughout the organization. Kimmerle, Wodzicki, and Cress (2008) state that this is especially true if “they are uncertain that their information is correct, and they prefer to contribute information that can be validated by others. Consequently, they will not introduce information that is only uniquely available to them themselves (p.385).”

## **Communities of Practice**

Originally, the term Communities of Practice (CoP) was used to refer to the coming together of individuals who had similar understanding about what they were doing and how this impacted them and their communities (Bolisani & Scarso, 2014). However, this notion has evolved over time and been adopted by researchers in the field of Knowledge Management. One of the recent formal definition of Communities of Practice (CoP) is “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Inger 2002, p. 4, as cited in Agarwal & Agarwal, 2016). It is based on the notion of collective learning and group expertise (Agarwal & Agarwal, 2016). The concept is used to demonstrate how knowledge is created and shared within an organization, and the basis of the social learning system (Bolisani & Scarso, 2014). Though the concept remains the same, the names used by different organizations vary. Some of the names used include learning clubs, tech forums, or thematic groups. Membership of the CoPs occurs personally and professionally as individuals exchange information and experiences. CoP can be an essential tool for problem solving and sustainable innovation in organizations (Agarwal & Agarwal, 2016).

## **Job Demands**

Chen and Chen (2014) defined job demands as “the physical, social, or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental efforts and are therefore associated with certain physiological or psychological costs” (p. 46). Flight attendants are frontline employees hence their work can be viewed as emotional. They spend a great deal of time taking customers’ requests and listening to their complaints and are expected to handle these complaints effectively (Karatepe & Vatankhah, 2015). In addition, their work includes long hours, confined workspaces, little autonomy, and demanding customers (Chen & Chen, 2014). The physical nature of the job and unusual environment of air travel promotes erratic sleep patterns, constant shifts in routine, as well as a job that is physically demanding. Researchers (e.g., Chen

& Kao, 2012) have found that high job demands lead to increased stress, burnout, low productivity, and organizational commitment, and hinders cooperation among employees. This in turn can lead to increased employee turnover which would cost the airlines a lot of money.

## **Job Demands Impact Life Experiences**

The flight attendant work group experiences physical and emotional demands that go beyond job role work groups. While belonging and social identification are present for many work groups like engineers, accountants, or other office jobs, flight attendants have measurable physiological similarities that stay with them even when they leave work.

A flight attendant's job has much to do with the customers and customer service. Part of their skills include surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA) that affects their emotional labor. SA requires the flight attendant to exhibit an emotion that they do not necessarily have to feel. In other words, they use a facade to let the customer know that they are being heard. DA, on the other hand, requires the flight attendant to attempt to feel the emotion they are displaying. Both levels of acting have an impact on emotional well-being of FAs (Jeon, 2016, p. 348).

Additionally, a study conducted by McNeely et al. (2014, p.3) shows that 15% of flight attendants report having acute or chronic emotional illness such as sleep disturbances, depression, and/or anxiety. When faced with these emotional demands, Chen and Chen (2014, p.50) state that flight attendants "may not only hesitate to carry out proactive safety behaviors, such as taking the initiative in promoting safety programs or communicating any they have safety concerns to managers but may also neglect basic safety routine duties."

The work environment for a flight attendant has difficult emotional demands beyond those of most occupations (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Williams, 2003). When considering that the safety of passengers is dependent upon the ability of the flight attendant to perform essential job functions (Kao, Stewart, & Lee, 2009), it is critical for businesses to understand how emotional and physical demands of a work group impact MS.

Flight attendants are subject to radiation, poor air quality, elevated ozone levels, pesticides, high occupational noise levels, and hypoxia (Ballard et al., 2006; Griffiths & Powell, 2012; Grajewski, et al., 2016; Rayman, 2002). Flight attendants also experience intense physical job demands (McNeely et al., 2018).

The physical job demands of the flight attendant work group leads to health problems (Chen & Chen, 2012). In McNeely et al.'s (2014) study after adjusting for age of the general population, flight attendants have a three-time greater risk of chronic bronchitis with lower smoking levels than the general population and a greater than three-time risk of cardiac disease though they have less cases of hypertension and obesity than the general population. Flight attendants also have a higher rate of reproductive cancers, sleep disorders, and fatigue. As flight attendants increase tenure, they also increase their risk of sleep disorders, alcohol abuse, cancer, foot surgery, and infertility.

Emotional job demands present similar physiological similarities in flight attendants. Stress and disengagement occur when job demands outweigh the resources provided to manage the job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Flight attendants endure a great deal of emotional labor, especially female flight attendants. Female flight attendants are perceived to be more subordinate than male flight attendants, so as a result they endure behavior from passengers that could affect them

emotionally; these behaviors towards flight attendants include complaints about their airline services and passengers speaking to them rudely (Williams, 2003, p.516).

## **When Social Groups Become Work Tribes**

### *Shared Life Experience*

The nature of the flight attendant work tribe reaches beyond the definition of a social group because health and lifestyle factors connect flight attendants beyond social group and CoP. Flight attendants are in a job category that suffers from chronic health issues due to their work environment, sleep deprivation, irregular schedules – issues that stay with them even as they leave work and enter their home environment.

The presence of a work tribe occurs when the workers have a connection beyond their job. In the case of flight attendants, fluctuating schedules, physiological demands, and the emotional toll of SA and DA connect the tribe even after the flight attendant is clocked out. Where social identity promotes association and actions as determined by the group, the phenomenon of the flight attendant study suggests that the association to the tribe dictates not only actions within the work environment but outside of it as well.

### *Security*

In addition to shared life experience outside of work, flight attendants depend upon one another for safety. An aircraft may provide as few as two or as many as six flight attendants on an aircraft where their job is to maintain the safety of the passengers and cabin crew. The flight attendants' dependence upon one another for security in the air transfers to the knowledge management system where they realize proper training and improved knowledge transfer will impact their personal safety and that of the other passengers and workers on future flights. The security provided by flight attendants can save their lives, and it has become a critical factor in the identification of a work tribe.

### *Loyalty*

Perhaps as a result of the shared life connections and protection provided to one another in the work tribe, the third factor found in work tribes is loyalty. Loyalty is discussed at length in academic articles in terms of customer loyalty. Attention is also paid to the concept of employee loyalty to the company. In work tribes, the concept of loyalty is regarding loyalty to one another – worker loyalty to other workers. In the presence of a work tribe, loyalty is demonstrated through workers acting on behalf of the tribe, even when those actions conflict with personal or company goals. The worker sees the tribe as an extension of themselves and views loyalty to the tribe as loyalty to self.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE PRESENCE OF A WORK TRIBE**

For the remainder of this chapter, the concept of a social group with high job demands and similarities in both physiological and emotional health issues is referred to as a work tribe. The concept of the work tribe in the flight attendant case study, the prevalence of work tribes in industry publications, and the problem researchers face in not addressing work tribes will be discussed.

Work tribes exist in companies and identifying their presence can serve as a benefit to leaders and to the organization (DeRouw, 2019; Godin, 2008; Logan & Fischer, 2008; Murphy, 2019). Work tribes serve as a catalyst in knowledge management systems as they are a social group that naturally puts CoP into place

to promote the security of the tribe. Flight attendants specifically demonstrated this phenomenon in the Operating Experience of first-time flight attendants.

In a two-year study of knowledge management systems with flight attendants at an international United States-based airline, the flight attendants revealed the existence a *work tribe*. The flight attendant case study followed and measured flight attendants and supervisors throughout the Operating Experience (OE). The OE is the FAA-mandated final evaluation of first-time flight attendants. During the OE, first-time flight attendants are expected to demonstrate competency in required job safety tasks with little or no coaching from an onboard supervisor.

According to academic research, a strong company culture with trust in leadership, social identity, group learning, and communities of practice (COP) leads to a strong knowledge management system. The flight attendant work tribe demonstrated many of these same attributes throughout the study and therefore their impact on the knowledge management system went unmeasured and unchecked.

Identifying where work tribes exist, how they positively impact company results, and how they can negatively impact results will improve the company's understanding of what is occurring within the knowledge management system itself.

## **Failure to Identify the Work Tribes**

Flight attendants learn their roles through close interaction during group training, mentorship, and colleague support. Since the managers are on the ground during flights, flight attendants build a social network that is not reliant on management, but on their fellow team members. The nature of the flight attendant's role requires their presence on aircraft for the safety of passengers. Due to the high safety knowledge required to do their job, flight attendants rely on each other (not just the company) for the knowledge and skill transfer required to be successful in their job. A CoP is critical in the success of the flight attendant job. Successful knowledge management systems take the social nature of the work group into account when developing internal learning systems to navigate how workers will learn their job role. This result is the development of an elevated level of trust between workers, frictionless knowledge management systems, and the ability to accurately measure knowledge transfer.

## **A Case Study**

At a U.S.-based international airline, a work tribe was identified as a group within the corporate culture that behaves in similar manners in various parts of the country regardless of the individuals not having met each other. Over the course of observing 29 flights and 6 focus groups in various parts of the United States, the research led to the presence of underlying similarities in answers, suggestions, and discussions from flight attendants. To maintain confidentiality, the airline took precautions to ensure that flight attendants did not attend the focus group with acquaintances or friends within the airline. The precautions included emails, surveys, and conversations with supervisors reminding the flight attendants that participation in the study is confidential.

Without prior connections to each other, both the flight observations and the focus groups allowed researchers to see how quickly connections were made among participants and how the tribe, rather than existing personal relationships, dictated the behavior of the group.

The purpose of the flight observations and focus groups was unrelated to work tribes' research. However, through the two-year study of the flight attendants at one airline, researchers found that the work tribe

dictated unexpected behaviors in the knowledge management system that were more closely related to connections made by the workers in terms of life experience outside of work, loyalty to one another – even those workers they had not met previously, and a need to protect or feel security within the work tribe. Once researchers identified work tribes, they were able to review the data collected to find evidence of the work tribe.

Through the 29 observed flights, the willingness of workers to share and transfer knowledge in the OE of first-time flight attendants was the most important finding of this study. Including both explicit knowledge transfer (that which can be shared) and tacit knowledge transfer (that which cannot be easily documented or verbalized), flight attendant supervisors executed formal and informal instruction to first-time flight attendants on 29 flights in this case study. As first-time flight attendants began their OE, supervisors were seen and heard showing empathy, care, support, and affirmation to the first-time flight attendants. The flight attendant supervisors were heard sharing information above and beyond what is provided in the multi-week training program.

The impact on the knowledge management system when flight attendants willingly transfer knowledge above and beyond what is expected of them is that first-time flight attendants receive additional tacit knowledge that they may have had to learn on their own over time. Instead, first-time flight attendants receive knowledge and skills more quickly allowing them to master their role with the support of the tribe.

Unlike some knowledge management systems that show an unwillingness for workers to transfer knowledge as they fear that sharing knowledge can make themselves less valuable to the organization. With the existence of the work tribe, the tribe is more concerned with the needs of the tribe rather than the needs of the individual, allowing for less friction in the knowledge management system, less egos with individuals who transfer knowledge, and a knowledge management system that aligns with the work tribe: to get as much useful information into the hands of the new flight attendant as possible.

Through focus groups, the researcher understood through tacit knowledge transfer that flight attendants were offering the same suggestions and speaking about unrelated requests in the focus group, altogether avoiding the questions that the focus group was aimed to answer. Rather than addressing researchers' questions directly, the flight attendants suggested mentor programs and additional job resources that were unrelated to the focus group questions. When examined through the lens of current research and knowing the high job demands of the flight attendants' role, the focus groups produced a work tribe requesting increased job resources to counterbalance the high job demands.

The focus group inquired as to flight attendants' use of a training evaluation tool and instead were informed about the values and needs of the work tribe. Utilizing NVivo Software, the five focus group transcriptions were coded and placed into categories based on theme. Out of 38 total themes identified, five themes were outside the parameters of what the study was measuring and also included references in 80% of the focus groups and at least 20 independent references to that theme (Table 1).

*Table 1. References to themes outside of case study scope that flight attendants referenced in focus groups*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of Focus Group References to Theme</b>	<b>Number of Independent References to Theme</b>
Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)	5	22
Mentor/Mentor Program	4	50
New Flight Attendants are nervous/anxious	5	29

New Flight Attendant is relatable	5	28
New Flight attendant's personality (positive or negative reference)	5	56

The flight attendants revealed through the transcript that they collectively identified the same themes though they did not attend focus groups in the same geographic locations or meet to discuss the focus group prior to their arrival in the room. The solutions brought to the focus groups provided the airline with critical information that allows the company to address potential gaps in the knowledge management system.

#### *Success of the Work Tribe*

The company benefited from taking a qualitative approach to understanding the measurement tools with the knowledge management system. The qualitative approach allowed for inductive analysis revealing that the CoP in work tribes goes beyond in-person collaboration and towards a group think where individuals of the tribe reach the same conclusions because of their similar circumstances. The company benefitted from the work tribe when the focus group openly shared solutions to improve the knowledge management system while also revealing how the workers proactively work through obstacles presented within the knowledge management system. The obstacles were not brought up to the company previously because the work tribe solved the problem themselves without intervention from the company.

Numerous successes were revealed through the work tribe including several informal mentorship programs that individuals adopted when no formal mentorship programs were in process. The work tribe found methods to balance nerves and anxiety with new flight attendants while measuring job performance in the new flight attendants' first trip. The work tribe found ways to relate to the experiences of new flight attendants and use those to coach and assist them in learning how to perform job duties.

In addition to informal mentorship, flight attendant supervisors stepped into roles as coaches and teachers of first-time flight attendants. Though first-time flight attendants had just completed weeks of training when they entered the first flight OE, the supervisors found ways to transfer tacit knowledge that only comes from years of experience with the aircraft and company.

The benefits of the work tribe in the knowledge management system were evident throughout the case study and allowed the company to uncover gaps in the current system to ensure the company meets the needs of both supervisors, new flight attendants, and ultimately work tribe.

#### *Work Tribes Identifies Solutions*

The flight attendants were unfamiliar with the literature suggesting that the best recourse for high job demand is to provide workers with additional resources. Regardless of city or state, the focus groups continued to offer solutions that pointed towards more resources rather than solutions to improve the evaluation of knowledge transfer measurement tools. The presence of the work tribe, the quick connection and trust built among co-workers allowed the company insight into problems the work tribe diagnosed. Even better, the work tribe had ready-made solutions for the company to put into place.

#### *Protection and Loyalty of the Work Tribe*

In contrast to the many benefits of work tribes noted here, it is possible for work tribes to create an obstacle for companies looking to measure knowledge transfer. Flight attendants are part of a unique work tribe that relies on a certain level of comradery and sisterhood (or brotherhood) that is not taken into consideration with the rigorous demand of the one-on-one job observation mandated by the FAA. While the FAA requires that a supervisor objectively evaluate the work of a trainee, that is not the world the flight attendants inhabit. On an anonymous survey, flight attendants were able to answer performance

measurement scenarios with approximately 50% accuracy. In multiple face-to-face focus groups, not one flight attendant stated that they would evaluate performance measurement accurately if it meant giving a negative score. Not one. As researchers dug deeper, they uncovered flight attendants' willingness to score others based on how they predicted the flight attendant would perform in the future. These statements of loyalty to the tribe itself trumped loyalty to the company.

The decision to provide evaluations based on feelings rather than evidence was also seen when flight attendants responded that they often evaluate a trainee not on how they perform, but on how they feel the trainee will perform when they are not nervous. The evaluation score was based on connection to the tribe and association with the individual's position. In the focus groups, flight attendants are often equated scoring the evaluation form based on how the evaluator felt when they were a trainee, rather than associating the score with the feeling or job behaviors of the trainee. The disassociation of the score reflecting the performance of the trainee further establishes that the score reflects the association with a tribe rather than the individual score of the flight attendant. In each focus group, the supervisors made statements based on scenarios and trainees they had never met. The practice of scoring higher than earned, based on personal experience or association with the tribe was about protecting the tribe.

After completing months and years of research in the airline industry, the dangers of the flight attendant job are evident. In addition to health and emotional problems described earlier in this chapter, feelings of isolation associated with the travel and the job demands are also present as flight attendants address solutions that would not impact knowledge transfer measurement (as knowledge transfer measurement was the purpose of the focus groups).

### *The Quick Induction into the Tribe*

When flight attendants arrive at work, they have a few moments to build a relationship with a co-worker that they will then spend hours with within a dangerous job. Flight attendants rely on each other for emotional, sometimes physical support. They have demanding customers, health issues because of their profession, and other personal issues that come from the inconsistency of their sleep schedule. In most cases, the relationship they build with a coworker is fleeting and one-time-only. Yet their relationship to the tribe strengthens the loyalty and connection with the tribe with every new relationship.

The elevated level of stress and work demands require a kinship to be developed quickly for the flight attendants to rely on each other as an additional resource to do their job. As flight attendants are hired and trained to provide a safe passage to travelers in the air, they spend much of their time interacting with passengers, de-escalating demanding passenger situations, and pouring one hundred drinks in under an hour. Given the strenuous job demands, it is understandable why flight attendants need the resources of a tribe.

Fast relationships were formed with flight attendants attending the focus group sessions. At the onset of this study, the research questions did not include an investigation of work tribes. If work tribes were a construct of this study, the qualitative design might have included a measurement of body language and facial expressions to understand more of the unspoken language of the work tribe. What was discovered in the study is each focus group repeatedly encountered flight attendants who shared names with each other and built relationships quickly. The study design intentionally kept the flight attendants out of the conference room before focus group sessions to remove the opportunity to build rapport and learn names, which could accidentally be used in the transcription.

No matter what steps were taken, the flight attendants met like old friends. They spoke the same language. They had the same experiences. They knew each other without knowing each other. Their

relationship was not purely social, they were tribal. They had (figuratively) been to war together even though they had never met.

### *Informal and formal leadership of the tribe*

Within the focus group, work tribe leaders were often identified through their engagement with the case study discussion, willingness to share personal information, and tenure with the company. Flight attendants that received affirmation and agreement from the rest of the group appeared as informal leaders, and they shared the characteristics of expressing ideas, sharing personal insight, and working for the company longer than other flight attendants in the room.

The purpose of the case study was not to uncover the leaders existing within the work tribe, but the presence of informal leadership will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A solution to firms understanding a work tribe is identifying when a work tribe is present, what resources the tribe needs to counterbalance high job demands, and how the values of the organization are (or can be) aligned with the values of the tribe.

### **Identify the work tribe**

The Work Tribe builds on the Social Identification Model, which does not require human interaction or cohesion to exist to have a social identity to a group. A work tribe consists of some of the same characteristics of a social group where there is a value to the individual member and emotional connection. However, the Work Tribe goes beyond social identity in the work environment and touches all aspects of workers' lives. Like a tribe of people with customs, language, belonging, and identity that is unique to them and translates to all parts of life: home, family, and work, the work tribe eclipses the expectations of the company and prioritizes the tribe needs and expectations. This can be of invaluable benefit to the company when the work tribe goals and values align with those of the company. The work tribe can serve as an obstacle when the goals and values of the tribe and company are not aligned.

The Work Tribe also builds on the work relating Communities of Practice (COP) to knowledge management systems. When informal communities of practice exist and without manager oversight, as is the case with flight attendants, a company has little ability to intercede on the knowledge transferred between workers. The benefit to companies with positive work culture and trust in leadership is that often the work tribe values align with the values of the company. When both sets of values are aligned, the CoP works for the benefit of the company and can serve as a catalyst in knowledge management systems.

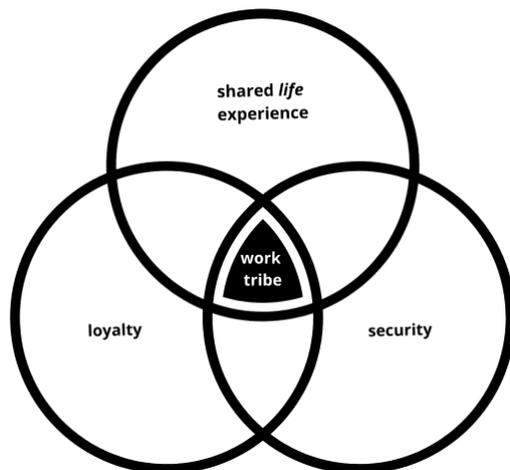
### *The Work Tribe, Defined*

A Work Tribe exists at the intersection of the social group with three additional work factors. First, the job demands outweigh the resources needed to complete the job, leading to high stress on the job. The limit of resources is stretched due to changes in air travel with COVID19. Second, the work environment encroaches on home, personal, family, and other non-work-related life. Flight attendants have increased health risks compared to the public and lifestyle issues like sleep deprivation and irregular schedules that further alienate the group from the population. The third factor is emotional problems that connect the social group. The combination of the three factors with a community of practice where social groups

already exist leads to a company that lacks the ability to control aspects within the knowledge management system.

Figure 1 provides a visualization of the factors that, when all are present, produce an environment where a work tribe is likely. As the case study noted, workers have a sense of comradery and loyalty to each other due to what they endure on the job. Work tribes emerge when there is a sense of security when the group is dependent upon one another for safety in the workplace. The work tribe is also a result of lifestyle experiences that impact the worker beyond the workday/night. Examples of shared lifestyle experiences outside work for flight attendants include fluctuating schedules, high altitude work environment, and a high physical/emotional toll. With these three shared and unique needs among a group of workers, it is hard to dismiss the fact that the natural sense of a tribe is formed or can be formed.

Figure 1 Work Tribe model demonstrates the three factors that lead to the presence of Work Tribes: shared life experience beyond the demands of the job, loyalty to tribe members over company or job, and protective behaviors ensuring the security of the tribe



The workers acted in accordance with the needs of the work tribe itself, rather than aligning with the expectations or priorities set forth by the company. At times, this group think benefited the company in terms of knowledge transfer. The outcome of the tribe acting outside of the knowledge management system design is that the measurement tool loses its effectiveness.

### **Identify Where Work Tribes Exist**

The understanding of work tribes helps companies to impact knowledge management systems. As companies understand how a work tribe both positively and negatively impacts the operations of both formal and informal knowledge management systems, they can implement strategies to employ or counter-act the impact of work tribes.

The first steps to identifying a work tribe is to determine if the three factors - shared life experience, loyalty, and security – are present. If so, the company investigates the presence of a work tribe and how that presence impacts the success, and potential obstacles, of the knowledge management systems.

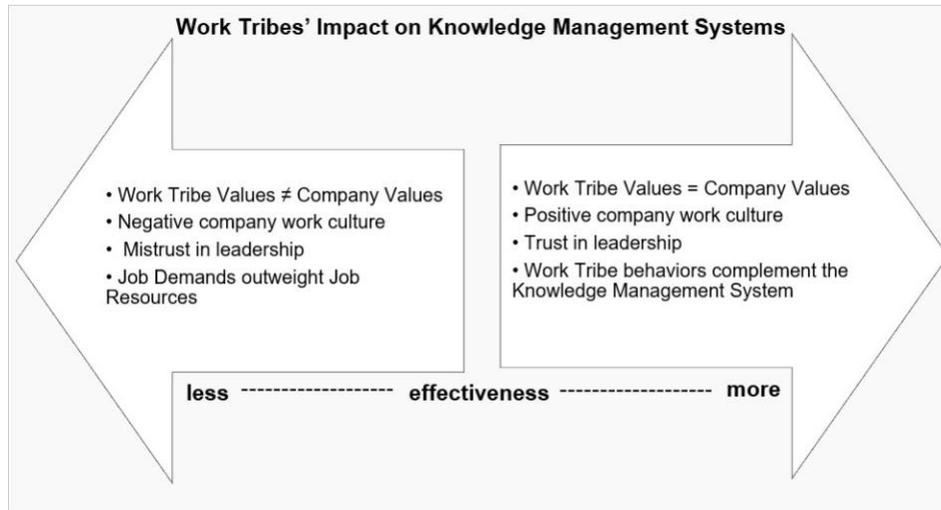
### *Examining Work Tribe Factors*

The results of the two-year study of flight attendants overwhelmingly pointed to the company's success in providing an environment where the work tribe improves the effectiveness of a knowledge management system while at the same time experiences a loss of control in the measurement of knowledge transfer. While this case study revealed that work tribes have a mostly positive impact on knowledge management systems, it is unlikely that is the case in all companies with work tribes. The first step to understanding how a company can work alongside the work tribe to improve the knowledge management system is to properly identify where work tribes exist, who are the informal leaders, and what are the values of the work tribe.

Since work tribes can have both positive and negative impacts on knowledge management systems, the awareness that workers identify feelings and value by their association with their job role is helpful to companies. Companies should work to understand the values and feelings of the work tribe to see how the company aligns with the group's values. Where there is alignment, there is less room for friction. Where the company and work tribe are not aligned, the company may need to alter messaging or core values to better align with its workers – especially if those workers represent a sizable portion of the population.

Consider how Figure 2 provides an example to firms where their knowledge management system can be positively and negatively impacted by the presence of work tribes. Knowledge management systems grow stronger when values are aligned. In addition, trust in leadership and a positive company culture where workers feel supported aids in the effectiveness of knowledge management systems. Companies must also consider how the natural behaviors of the work tribe work within the knowledge management system. For example, flight attendants are hired for their ability to protect passengers through following safety procedures while also providing elevated levels of customer service. Flight attendants tend to exhibit empathy, care, and friendliness both on and off the job. Companies who understand the behaviors of the flight attendant work tribe can design a knowledge management system allowing for flight attendants to communicate and socially engage in other ways so that the knowledge management systems complement the flight attendants' behaviors.

Figure 2: Work Tribes' Impact on Knowledge Management Systems



Conversely, a company's failure to recognize a work tribe can negatively impact the knowledge management system. Identifying the existence of the work tribe allows companies to understand how a work tribe impacts the knowledge management system – even when the impact is positive. When a company fails to identify the knowledge management system, it is possible that the company will continue to dedicate time and resources into strategies that the company believes propels the system forward while the tribe is transferring tacit knowledge and ensuring knowledge sharing. When the company is unaware of the knowledge behaviors and informal knowledge systems the tribe puts into place, the company may be crediting the wrong intercession with producing a positive impact on the knowledge management system.

In the flight attendant case study, workers were observed and readily communicated their willingness to evaluate first-time flight attendants based on aspects of the work tribe – loyalty, shared life experiences, and security – rather than evaluating based on job performance. While this may have a negative impact, it is counterbalanced by the positive impacts workers had on the knowledge management system. The supervisors act as coaches, trainers, and mentors for as long a period as needed regardless of whether the company offers a formal mentorship program.

Identifying work tribes is increasingly important in companies with poor work culture or low trust in leadership. The success or failure of the knowledge management system can be improved upon, but companies should start by understanding their population, including where social groups exist, how CoP are active in the company, and where work tribes have formed.

To mitigate job demands, companies need to provide the workers with job resources. Xanthopoulou et al. (2008) define job resources as “those physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that: (1) are functional in achieving work goals; (2) reduce job demands and the associated costs; and/or (3) stimulate personal growth, learning and development (p. 345). Job resources can be classified into two types of motivators: intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Job resources that are intrinsic motivators promote employees' individual growth and satisfy their basic needs. For example, when the FA are provided support by their colleagues and supervisors, their need for belonging is met. Extrinsic motivators, on the other hand, promote employees' job productivity (Xanthopoulou et al., 2008). When job demands outweigh job resources, the firm has an opportunity to survey workers and understand what resources will make the biggest impact. When firms provide resources to counterbalance high job demands, workers feel more motivated and less stressed, resulting in a greater capacity to perform their job.

Providing resources and designing knowledge management systems that anticipate job demands help workers to work through the challenge of the job and perform their job roles. Job resources allow workers to counterbalance the heavy job demands. The ability of workers in dangerous roles like flight attendants perform safety duties directly associated with the number of resources they are given in their roles. Resources include the training provided to them by the company, job autonomy in their role, social connections that they build at work (Chen & Chen, 2014), and feedback (Chen & Kao, 2012).

Lastly, workers in dangerous or emotionally-taxing jobs do not expect a company to remove all risk. However, aligning the company values with the tribe values ensures that the tribe continues to be a benefit to the knowledge management system. When physiological and emotional problems are an outcome of the work environment, companies can measure and understand the degree that physiological and emotional problems impact workers and provide health and safety resources to improve the lives of workers. Multiple options such as on-site clinics, discounted mental health services, increased vacation pay, and other solutions may provide some relief to workers to lessen potential negative impacts.

As professional and industry journals explore the presence of work tribes and their impact on business, researchers within knowledge management must explore how work tribes engage and interact with knowledge management systems. The success of knowledge management systems is dependent upon firms recognizing how external factors impact the success of knowledge transfer and behavior change in the work environment.

The lack of research today defining work tribes, assessing the value of work tribes, and understanding the impact of work tribes on knowledge management systems provides a large research gap. The priority for future research is to test additional groups that meet the factors indicating a work tribe is present and determine if they have an impact on knowledge management systems. Additional studies need to be completed to understand if it is true that work tribes have a mostly positive impact on knowledge management systems, while having an adverse effect on the measurement of these systems.

The work tribe is not unique to the aviation industry and in-flight crews. It is likely that air pilots may also operate within work tribes. In addition, hospital staff, first responders, FEMA, rough necks, social workers, military, and other work groups have similar work roles that encroach on family life and home environments. The combination of security, loyalty, and shared life experiences is evident in more communities of workers where a social group at a company becomes a work tribe. Studying additional populations will identify and strengthen the criteria that make-up work tribes.

Future research opportunities exist within additional industries like healthcare, emergency response, oil and gas, and active military to understand if the same phenomenon of work tribes impact knowledge management systems. Dependent upon the goal of the work tribe, future research will provide evidence of when work tribes serve as a catalyst and when they serve as an obstacle in knowledge management systems.

An additional opportunity for future research is to assess how a company can interrupt or break the cycle where a work tribe is having a negative impact on one aspect of a knowledge management system. An example of interfering with the knowledge management system is a study where the company increases job resources to balance job demands. The opportunity to further research how additional job resources impact not only job demands, but also the strength of work tribes is a potential future study for this topic. As job resources are increased, knowledge management systems may see a positive impact on knowledge behaviors that produce a better functioning knowledge management system.

## CONCLUSION

The presence of work tribes presents an opportunity for companies when measuring the success of knowledge management systems. A work tribe is connected to the tribe over the company and causes members of the tribe to behave in a way that expresses loyalty and protection to act in favor of the tribe. The behavior of a work tribe impacts knowledge management systems and has shown a positive impact on the function of knowledge management systems.

Human beings are social beings and have a need for belonging which motivates them to find and maintain group membership (Haldorai et al., 2020). Work tribes are the kinships that exist at work and provide the workers with a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging stimulates the belief that one is respected, supported, and in general, the other workers are interested in one's well-being and success. Individuals who experience a sense of belonging tend to portray positive emotions and as a result perform beyond what is expected of them (Haldorai et al., 2020). Tribes at work are especially important as they provide employees with a collective goal and are viewed as a way that increases their odds of success in the workplace. In some cases, these tribal ties are so strong that even after employees leave their places of work, they continue to stay connected with their former colleagues. Organizations should identify where work tribes exist and celebrate how they positively impact knowledge management systems. Companies should also ensure the values of the company continue to align with the values of the work tribe. When a work tribe is seen to have a negative impact on the measurement of a knowledge management system, companies can work with informal leaders to understand the gaps in the system and make the necessary changes.

Work tribe leadership, even if informal, provides a crucial resource for companies to stay aligned with the needs and values of the tribe. The company should work to recognize if and where informal leadership exists to ensure that there are shared goals between the organization and the tribe.

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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