

Exploring the Reason for Tacit Knowledge Sharing and Knowledge Hiding of Skilled employees at a Small Family Firm in China

Research Area: HRM/Organisational Behaviour/Organisational Studies

1. The purpose of the paper

Knowledge sharing is the key to family firms' survival because the hard-to-imitate characteristics could help knowledge innovation of small family enterprises. However, companies are hard to obtain tacit knowledge due to its tacit and dynamic nature. Concurrently, people may hide it while sharing (Connelly et al., 2012), depending on employees' motivation (Gagne et al., 2019). However, little research focuses on knowledge sharing and hiding simultaneously (Hadjelias et al., 2021; Pereira and Mohiya, 2021). Hence, this study aims to explore how and why employees share and hide knowledge simultaneously in a small family company. To address this central question, three specific research questions need to be addressed:

- How do skilled employees share tacit knowledge?
- How do they hide it?
- Why do they share and hide tacit knowledge?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Tacit knowledge, knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding

Tacit knowledge mainly comes from previous individual experience (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Within the organisation, knowledge is often shared through four mechanisms: sharing to organisational databases, in formal interactions, in informal interactions and within communities of practice (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002). These almost covers diverse types of sharing (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002).

Along with sharing, individuals holding knowledge ownership may decide to hide knowledge (Connelly et al., 2012). Knowledge hiding is an intentional act to withhold knowledge hiding and includes evasive hiding, rationalised hiding and playing dumb (Connelly et al., 2012). Knowledge hiding seems to be barriers of knowledge sharing (Hadjelias et al., 2021), whereas other researchers insisted that knowledge sharing and hiding may not be the opposite (Huo et

al., 2016). Hence, investigating knowledge hiding could help to increase the understanding of knowledge sharing, in particular when studying knowledge sharing and hiding simultaneously (Hadjielias et al., 2021; Gagne et al., 2019).

2.2. Reasons for tacit knowledge sharing and hiding

Existing literature shows that corporate characteristics affect knowledge sharing and hiding. For example, the family business has the advantage of close relationships between members related to tacit knowledge transfer (Zhou, 2019). It is less likely to use incentive methods in this context to motivate employees' knowledge sharing because of limited resources (Lin, 2013). Jealousy is shared among family and non-family members, causing hiding (Si, 2020).

SDT is valuable to explain tacit knowledge sharing from the motivation perspective (Wang and Hou, 2005). In SDT, motivation is divided into autonomous (intrinsic and identified motivation) and controlled motivations (external and introjected regulation) (Wang and Hou, 2005). Knowledge self-efficacy and trust are considered the autonomous motivation to affect knowledge sharing (Gagne et al., 2019). On the other hand, controlled motivation, such as rewards, either inspires or hinders knowledge sharing (Gagne et al., 2019). Nevertheless, SDT has been applied less to researching knowledge hiding areas (Gagne et al., 2019). Hence, this study adopted SDT as the theoretical foundation.

3. Methodology

This study has adopted the single case study strategy and qualitative research methods. It is better to address the research question — exploring why skilled employees share or hide tacit knowledge in a small family business. The case company is a good example of knowledge sharing. That is because its training and development programs are widely acknowledged in the local area. As tacit knowledge is embedded in people's minds, knowledge sharing and hiding much depend on how they interpret these behaviours from stories and experience. The data was collected from semi-structured interviews with 22 skilled employees and analysed by template analysis.

4. Main findings

The study has found tacit knowledge was the experience-based expertise. The skilled employee shared or hid concurrently in the case company. The different personal motivations and organisational characteristics influenced them to undertake both behaviours simultaneously.

Some of the reasons for sharing and hiding were the same, such as a close interpersonal relationship.

Tacit knowledge was shared in the formal training activities and informal occasions. Along with sharing, knowledge hiding could take place in the meantime. Third, the positive organisational context at the small family firm, such as the support from the owner-manager, collective culture with the family notion, close interpersonal relationships and a reward system, not only impacted tacit knowledge sharing practices but increased employees' sharing motivations. Sense of trust and confidence were considered either autonomous or controlled motivations for sharing, depending on the sharing approaches or groups of people. On the other side, the reasons for employees' knowledge hiding mainly reflect the issues in differential management between family and non-family members, for example, the owner-manager's favouritism towards family members, lack of a bonus and the '996' timetable for non-family employees.

5. Contribution and Implication

This study has made three theoretical contributions to the knowledge sharing literature within the small family firm context and Chinese context. First, it contributes to addressing a gap in the literature--studying knowledge sharing and hiding simultaneously. Besides, this study uses the different types of motivations in SDT to explore tacit knowledge sharing, other than the traditional distinction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Third, it enriches the Chinese literature of the knowledge sharing field. There is a novel finding in terms of the '996' working schedule in the research, meaning working 6 days per week and the working hours from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm each day. It is a significant reason for knowledge hiding in the case company, in line with the time pressure from the prior research.

This study can also facilitate owner-managers in the small family business to realise the importance of tacit knowledge sharing and hiding. Therefore, the small family business owner-managers can take a series of effective long-term actions (e.g., building an organisational culture) and short-term measures (e.g., offering incentives to non-family employees; improving working hours) to encourage skilled employees' knowledge sharing. Meanwhile, these actions could reduce the possibilities of knowledge hiding caused by the unfairness between family and non-family employees.

Keywords: knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding, small family firms, self-determination theory

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