

Knowledge Sharing Behavior: An empirical study in the Cyprus Cooperative Banking Sector

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Abstract

Knowledge management (KM) is critical for organizational success, innovations and for sustainability in the contemporary fast changing technological world. Appropriate allocation of knowledge within the workplace is responsible for the critical production input, quality value, production of long-term sustainable competitive advantage and increase of financial and organizational performance. Lack of knowledge management raises unwillingness to share knowledge among employees, thus leading to uncertainty, bad communication and misunderstandings. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore employees' perceptions and experiences concerning knowledge sharing within the cooperative banking sector in Cyprus. A purposive sample of 13 participants, current employees in the cooperative banking sector of Cyprus, was used for the present study. The data were collected through conducting in-depth, unstructured, open-ended interviews. During the interviews, the perceptions and experiences of the participants concerning knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding in their workplace were obtained. Findings indicated that knowledge sharing promoted a favorable organizational climate, whereas knowledge hiding promoted negative behavior and organizational culture. Additionally, knowledge hiding was found to be more prevalent among lower level employees than those in upper levels of the cooperative banking sector of Cyprus.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Knowledge sharing, Organizational culture

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, rapid changes in the business environment have led to the adoption of new concepts, which brought about innovation, increased effectiveness, and sustainability within organizations (Soliman, 2011). Product life cycles have become very short due to changing customer preferences; even before a new technology enters the market, a new one is on its way to make the previous one obsolete (Sharma, 2013). The demand for innovations to gain a competitive advantage has forced the transformation of quality employees into sources of knowledge capital, so that knowledge may be developed and shared between colleagues (Rasmussen & Nielsen, 2011). Knowledge includes contextual information and experiences of individuals and their values, which can provide a framework for incorporating new information and experiences into the organization's culture (Huang & Lai, 2014). Researchers and practitioners characterized knowledge management (KM) as an important tool for developing organizations' and individuals' dynamic capabilities to deliver better products and services (Pugna & Boldeanu, 2014; Rasmussen & Nielsen, 2011).

When employees are willing to share their knowledge and expertise, KM can be beneficial to the success of an organization (Camelo-Ordaz, Garcia-Cruz, Sousa-Ginel & Valle-Cabrera, 2011; Mousavizadeh, Ryan, Harden & Windsor, 2015). It is a difficult task for managers' to implement successful KM and encourage employees to share their knowledge (Kim & Ko, 2014). Some employees are reluctant to share their knowledge with their colleagues and this impacts the quality of the relationship between employees (Connelly, Zweig, Webster & Trugakos, 2012). Consequently, reluctance on behalf of employees to reciprocate by sharing knowledge may create a negative organizational climate (Connelly et al., 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Management and Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge is the primary organizational source and asset, which has the capability to bring sustainable competitive advantage in the long-term (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014). The creation of knowledge depends on the accumulation of individuals' skills as well as training, communication, collaboration, and organizational environment and structure (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014). Gonzalez and Martins (2014) found that KM is a reliable tool for processing knowledge in the organizations in order to promote strategies for achieving sustainable competitive advantage in the market (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014). Moreover, Gonzalez and Martins (2014) noted that KM initiatives depend on the willingness of employees to share their knowledge and expertise. Organizational culture, specifically knowledge-oriented culture can stimulate the continuous dissemination of knowledge between individuals and favors

the development of improvements and innovations (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014). Teamwork is another important aspect, which can facilitate integration of multi-disciplinary knowledge and consequently encourage acquisition and utilization/dissemination of knowledge (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014).

Knowledge sharing is a significant ingredient for management success. Anand, Prasad, Sinha, and Prakhya, (2013) remarked that knowledge employees have an advantage over the traditional employees because they have a higher educational background, intelligence levels and rational thinking capability to challenge of the future businesses. Furthermore, the researchers stated that traditional management styles cannot produce the desired impact or results for their employees (Anand et al., 2013). The development of a knowledge sharing system within the organization involves management's efforts and attitudes to encourage the culture of sharing and learning from each other (Alrawi, Hamdan, Al-Taie & Ibrahim, 2013). Collaboration and continuous knowledge sharing will generate continuous improvements, quality performance, and enhanced productivity (Alrawi et al., 2013). Anand et al. (2013) clarified that it is difficult to replicate knowledge work, and this can make an organization a technologically driven, game changer, in the highly uncertain business market.

Punta and Boldeanu (2014) clarified that knowledge is a product of human reflections and experiences, and it is interpreted, contextualized, processed and stored in the human mind. Wang, Tseng, and Yen (2014) added that most knowledge is embedded in individuals' minds; therefore, managers should encourage them to share their knowledge, experiences, and information in order to spread, compile, and circulate it to create core corporate values. Through communications, internet, intranet, information technology (IT), knowledge sharing can be achieved and media (Chatterjee, 2014). Singh (2013) examined appropriate knowledge management systems (KMS) designed specifically to facilitate the sharing and integration of updated, real-time, and relevant knowledge. The researcher studied concepts and perceptions of KMS, as well as, KMS activities in organizations, and the results showed that only 27.27% had an existing KMS, 29.09% had never heard of KMS and 16.36% didn't have a KMS in their organization (Singh, 2013). Tacit and explicit knowledge must be processed systemically to acquire and communicate knowledge to employees in order to make them more effective and productive in their work, otherwise, knowledge unshared is of limited value for the organization and its employees (Singh, 2013).

The outcomes and capabilities of efficient and effective KM are innovation, increased value for clients, improved performance processes, competitiveness, financial returns, successful projects and growth of resources (Sharma, 2013). On the contrary, lack or improper KM can promote uncertainty and misunderstanding among employees and inability to create competitive advantage or be innovative (Gera, 2011).

Organizations that do not innovate run a large risk to become obsolete and to demise at the end (Soliman, 2011). According to Vashisth, Kumar, and Chandra (2010) individual, socio-organizational, and technological factors may facilitate or act as barriers to the implementation of KM. Factors, which act as barriers include lack of time to interact or to share knowledge, poor verbal and/or written communication and interpersonal skills, as well as lack of motivation for sharing knowledge (Vashisth, et al., 2010). The three facilitators can improve, stimulate, and promote the knowledge flow, whereas, when they act as obstacles they can hinder knowledge gathering, creation, and diffusion in the organizations (Vashisth, et al., 2010). Furthermore, the socio-organizational aspects deal with poor leadership and managerial direction, and lack of appropriate human resource management (HRM) practices such as rewards, incentives or recognition and the establishment of inappropriate organizational cultures, which do not support or foster teamwork and sharing (Vashisth, et al., 2010). Regarding the technological aspect, lack of integrating information systems or processes, lack of training on the new systems and processes, unrealistic expectations from technology and lack of technical support, and immediate maintenance of integrated IT systems may lead to inhibition of knowledge (Vashisth, et al., 2010).

Connelly and Zweig (2015) argued that employees and administration recognize the benefits, which they can obtain from knowledge sharing, but they are also aware of potential personal costs that knowledge sharing may involve. Many employees withhold or conceal knowledge because divulging personal knowledge to other colleagues may cause them a sense of fear, loss of unique status or power (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). Furthermore, employees may hide knowledge when it is complex, not related with the task and when employees perceive that the organizational climate does not promote knowledge sharing (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). The researchers showed that knowledge hiding reduces employees' creativity and triggers a reciprocal distrust loop, which leads to further hiding (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). The researchers identified that knowledge hidings are involved in three separate, but related behaviors such as pretending to be ignorant of the relevant knowledge, providing incorrect or misleading information and offering a justification for failing to provide requested knowledge (Connelly & Zweig, 2015). Peng (2014) also studied knowledge hiding and identified that people prefer to hide their knowledge because they perceive they will experience loss of control and negative emotions, such as personal loss, frustration and stress if they share it with others. Psychological ownership and territoriality are linked with knowledge is linked. Furthermore, employees perceive knowledge as a key factor, which influences their bargaining power over the organization, thus, they experience strong psychological ownership and consequently leading them to conduct dysfunctional behaviors to keep their control over the target and not allow others to control the ownership target (Peng, 2014).

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is created and maintained by the group of people that make up the organization and is a collective phenomenon (Maracine&Brancoveanu, 2012). Birasnav, et al., (2012) clarified that organizational culture determines individuals' formal, as well as informal behavior and expectations, and defines the types of people who fit in the organization, and it affects individuals' behavior and interactions with others inside and outside the organization. Maracine and Brancoveanu (2012) described organizational culture in their research as a complicated and comprehensive system of common rules, beliefs, values, and expectations that bind together all employees of an organization to create shared meanings among them. Therefore, the organizational culture reflects the personality of the organization, and distinguishes it from the competition (Maracine&Brancoveanu, 2012). Organizational culture influences the individuals and organization as a whole and then these two aspects exert an influence on the organizational performance and its competitiveness (Maracine&Brancoveanu, 2012). Nevertheless, organizational culture could either be a factor of success or failure for the organization because some organizational cultures promote productivity and performance and others do not (Maracine&Brancoveanu, 2012).

Pirjol and Maxim (2012) explored organizational culture and the way employees expressed it in organizations. The researchers presented a holistic picture on organizational culture, examining key factors that influence humans and their productivity, which are necessary for managers to consider while creating and building an ideal organizational culture. Organizational culture is identified to be written and unwritten rules, concepts, lifestyle, traditions, and beliefs that reflect every interaction within the organization's internal and external environment (Pirjol& Maxim, 2012). Moreover, the researchers remarked that organizational culture is about good communication between employees and departments, openness to new challenges, ethics, identity, control, acceptance of changes, climate of support, creativity and positive relations between people (Pirjol& Maxim, 2012). Pirjol and Maxim (2012) noted that the study of organizational behavior leads to the collection of objective and systematic information on the main factors that influence human activity in organizations, as well as, those human traits, which managers can influence in such a way to ensure maximum efficiency at work. The main factors, which influence human activity, were the professional training, practical and theoretical knowledge, creativity, innovation, and work experience (Pirjol& Maxim, 2012). Furthermore, the factors, which managers influenced, are the working conditions, organization's reputation, motivation policy, employee facilities, and organizational culture and behavior (Pirjol& Maxim, 2012). The researchers suggested that managers should become aware that building an effective organizational culture can

achieve short and long term benefits, thus, gradually make the organization successful (Pirjol& Maxim, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a generic qualitative research method to interpret and understand the phenomena that could emerge from the in-depth interviews. The researcher had the opportunity to study, understand underlying and nonobvious issues, complexities or experiences in every dimension and phase (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, &Ormsom, 2003). The sample of participants for the current study was small (13 current employees, all from the cooperative banking sector, in Nicosia area, Cyprus) and was purposely selected based on salient criteria such as working experience over five years and have direct experiences with knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding issues.

Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis

Data collection was completed in this generic qualitative study through in-depth unstructured, open-ended person-to-person interviews. The structure and questions asked in each interview differed according to the context of each discussion. The process of analyzing each text began with coding the data. The process involved identification of text segments, placing a bracket around them, and assigning a code phrase to describe the meaning of the text segmented (Creswell, 2008). Participants' knowledge sharing and hiding experiences, feelings, and perspectives were coded and a description was created for each interview. Afterwards, the similar groups from each description were coded and reduced to a smaller number of codes. I then wrote a qualitative report providing detailed information about the significant themes gathered from all thirteen descriptions. The perspectives of the phenomenon were explored from different vantage points, various roles and opposite meanings to consider the possible structural qualities that may evoke the textural qualities. Each participant's structural qualities and themes composed descriptions to develop a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience.

Research Question: How do employees perceive and describe their experiences on knowledge sharing/hiding?

RESULTS

The voluntary participants individually answered all interview questions intended to explore their perceptions, experiences and perceptions on knowledge sharing/hiding.

All participants were working in the cooperative banking sector for more than five years and had experiences with knowledge sharing and hiding. The sample of participants was comprised of more females (62%) than males (38%). The majority (69%) of the respondents was officers and the rest (31%) of the respondents were managers. The respondents had a work experience varying from six to 24 years. About (31%) of the respondents had fewer than 10 years working experience, roughly (38%) of the respondents had 11 to 19 years and the rest (31%) of the respondents had 20 to 24 years working experience within the cooperative banking sector. Moreover, the respondents' ages ranged from their 30's to their 50's, more than half of them (54%) being in their thirties, about (38%) of the sample being in their forties, and only (8%) of the respondents were at the age of 50.

The first theme that emerged from the data was that knowledge sharing is an important factor for the organizations because it promotes positive behavior between employees and positive climate within the workplace. The identification of the relation between knowledge sharing and organizational culture was determined by participants' responses. The participants (except one) holding managerial positions experienced knowledge sharing in their managerial careers and perceived that the existing culture in their organization was rather positive. On the contrary, the majority of the participants holding an officer's position experienced mainly knowledge hiding cases and indicated that the current culture in their organization was negative. The officers' responses also revealed that secrecy existed in their organization at high levels, and this indicated that the phenomenon of knowledge hiding is generally found among the lower level employees in the cooperative banking sector.

Additionally, two issues emerged in the study concerning the managerial staff and knowledge sharing. The first issue is that managers most probably experience rich knowledge sharing due to their "powerful" position – lower level employees will not deny sharing their knowledge with their managers because employees who intentionally hide their knowledge may be dismissed. The second issue identified is related to lack of or little experience with knowledge hiding when antagonism between colleagues is minimal (only few people hold managerial position and their position is not threatened nor need to show/prove their capabilities). In the present study, only one manager faced knowledge hiding issues with his leader, and later this manager faced knowledge hiding issues with a manager (during a merge with another cooperative bank) holding similar position. Another important point detected in the study is that those participants, who were moved to new positions in other departments, in order to be promoted in the future, faced aggressive knowledge hiding and misinformation from their colleagues because their co-workers saw them as a threat. Two of the participants stated, "when an individual is promoted to a managerial position he/she enjoys knowledge sharing experiences, but until that

promotion comes he/she may face aggressive knowledge hiding and misinformation.”

Overall, participants who experienced knowledge sharing cases have built positive relationships with those colleagues. Participants’ expressed positive the effects of knowledge sharing, including feelings of happiness, satisfaction, trust, confidence, friendliness, promote teamwork, build communication bridges, and positive organizational culture. Two participants have experienced knowledge sharing cases in many phases of their career with a particular colleague, and this drove both participants to develop diachronically positive interrelationships and mutual trust with their colleagues who shared their knowledge with them. One of the two participants holding a managerial position had experienced only knowledge sharing cases and stated “I feel like I have a backup at work for whatever case comes up because I know that at anytime this colleague will share his knowledge with me and help me make the right decision, remove obstacles, and carry on with my work.” This same participant noted that he felt respectful towards this invaluable colleague and emphasized that this knowledge sharing behavior between them, helped in building a positive organizational culture in the department and among its employees. Altogether taking into consideration all participants’ experiences, they perceived that a knowledge-sharing environment builds positive and trustful relationships among employees, and promotes a dynamic culture within which satisfied employees can work.

The majority of participants experienced knowledge hiding issues, and almost half of those participants (40%) experienced additionally cases of misinformation. The level of knowledge hiding in the cooperative banks was surprisingly high. Previous results aligned with these results (Connelly et al., 2012) however, I expected that knowledge hiding would be low in the cooperative banks’ workplace because their practices promote knowledge sharing and cooperation between the departments. All participants expressed negative effects of knowledge hiding and misinformation including negative relationships and behavior between colleagues, negative organizational culture, feelings of distrust, anger, disdain, and hostility. Likewise, all participants answered that they turned on other colleagues or to outsources (other specialized organizations) to obtain the required knowledge when they were rejected knowledge sharing or given misinformation.

Participants’ responses indicated that the reasons for experiencing knowledge hiding included jealousy, antagonism, and the non-knowledge sharing culture of their organization. One participant perceived that she was seen as a threat from the first minute she moved in to a new department and felt the jealousy from her colleague. “I was given the message from the first minute I arrived in the department that I was not welcome, and there was no space for me in the department. This participant experienced misinformation and knowledge hiding repetitively during the whole period she worked in the specific department. Respondents who experienced knowledge hiding explained that when knowledge hiding exists in the workplace, a

negative psychological attitude of employees towards their workplace and organization occurs. The feelings that were engendered from knowledge hiding behavior such as anger, hatred, dislike, hostility, and disdain did change respondents' behavior from positive to negative towards those colleagues and created a negative climate in the organization. Two participants expressed that "a negative climate and culture are developed where factors such as secrecy, distrust, individualism, hostility, antagonism, and negative relationships exist in the organization."

One of the themes that emerged from the interview questions was that psychologically, knowledge hiding creates negative behavior, leads to negative relationships, and to a negative and non-proactive climate. Participants stated that they could not continue to behave politely to those colleagues who hide knowledge from them. This behavior was expected and was in align with previous results which indicated that knowledge hiding reciprocates knowledge hiding via an interpersonal distrust loop in which colleagues are unwilling to share knowledge with them (Cerne, Nerstad, Dysvik, & Skerlavaj, 2014). Furthermore, it was detected that the negative and non-proactive psychological climate promotes employee dissatisfaction, low performance, low turnover, and tend to decrease stability. Participants expressed that the negative climate in their workplace had an impact on their psychology, it made them introverted, unhappy, and dissatisfied at their workplace.

In all cases examined, the top management did not support knowledge sharing within the organization. Additionally, participants detected that the top management, especially after merging, promoted knowledge hiding among employees, individualism, and secrecy. One participant illustrated that the top management told her "it would be preferable neither to have positive relationships nor to share knowledge with any colleague in the workplace; everyone should depend on their own strengths." One participant reacted to the knowledge hiding behavior and tried to protest about the existing knowledge hiding behavior and culture to the leader but the leader ignored her. The rest of participants answered that they did not react nor protest towards their top management about knowledge hiding because they knew that their leader would do nothing about it. These results were in align with previous results indicating that top management is a significant predictor of building organizational culture and positively affecting KM implementation (Mousavizadeh et al., 2015).

Participants, specifically the officers, indicated that their knowledge hiding experiences made them reluctant to work effectively (reluctant to offer good quality services to clients) and be productive. Likewise, they remarked that the unsupportive top management (management promoted secrecy between employees) and the existing knowledge hiding environment made them feel unhappy, disappointed, and unwilling to work. Most of the participants remarked that the knowledge hiding culture at their work affected their productivity in the long run. Participants cited

negative feelings after experiencing knowledge hiding, such as unhappiness, dissatisfaction, annoyance, anger, increased stress, hostility, and disdain. Participants emphasized that the negative environment at work affected them psychologically, demotivated them, made them unhappy, drove their productivity to low levels, and made them start thinking of the possibility to seek employment elsewhere. Five participants' stated "the negative environment at their work doesn't represent them and they had already started to look elsewhere for new work opportunities." Reduction in knowledge sharing changes the motivational climate at work, lessens employees' creativity and values, and promotes failures of the implementation of policies, practices and procedures of the working environment in the organization (Cerne et al., 2014).

IMPLICATIONS

The implications presented in this section were formulated using the literature review performed for this study and in addition to the responses received during the thirteen open ended unstructured interviews. The study results were a reflection of some earlier findings as well as a contradiction to others. The themes that emerged in this study are directed by employees' experiences, and perceptions concerning knowledge sharing as well as KM issues. The findings indicated that there is a strong relationship between knowledge sharing and positive organizational culture. Participants who experienced knowledge sharing have built positive feelings and relationships with those colleagues. Knowledge sharing engenders positive relationships, behavior and gradually builds knowledge culture, mutual trust, satisfaction, teamwork, and productivity. Taylor's (2013) results supported the above and indicated that knowledge sharing builds a knowledge culture and effective teams, which can face and address organizational challenges.

Managers mainly experienced knowledge sharing and this seems most probably due to low antagonism and due to their powerful position. On the contrary, officers experienced a greater degree of knowledge hiding than did managers, because of antagonism and unsupportive top management. The results showed that working in a knowledge sharing working environment, a positive organizational behavior culture can be built with positive interrelationships between colleagues. Cerne et al. (2014) and Mousavizadeh et al., (2015) noted that knowledge sharing directly promotes a positive and motivated organizational culture. Knowledge sharing is a social exchange relationship, which promotes creativity and positive work-related phenomena (Cerne et al., 2014). Constructs such as teamwork, organizational culture, organizational structure, development and absorption factors, as well as, the personality issues, clearly indicate they are associated either with the promotion of knowledge sharing or hiding. In the present study, the above mentioned components

achieved a knowledge hiding culture where colleagues denied sharing their knowledge with the participants because the organization's administration promoted individualism and secrecy (Gonzalez & Martins, 2014).

In the cooperative banks' top management, knowledge hiding was found to be high in its preferences and the key factors promoting this were antagonism, fear of threat of position, and jealousy. These findings were not expected especially in an organization where knowledge sharing should normally be promoted because all departments are interconnected and need to cooperate in order to offer a good quality package of services to their clients. Negative behavior and environment gradually created a negative culture where unhappy and dissatisfied employees worked with decreased efficiency. Gonzalez and Martins (2014) remarked that an organization's structure and culture stimulate interaction and cooperation between individuals, such that they share their knowledge and bring sustainable competitive advantage in the long term. Nonetheless, the negative environment is not affordable by all employees. Negative environment may trigger skillful and efficient employees to seek employment elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

In this study, 13 participants, all current employees in the cooperative banking sector of Cyprus, shared with the researcher their perceptions and experiences concerning knowledge sharing and hiding factors. Overall, the findings of the study indicated that the majority of the participants (77%) have experienced knowledge sharing and hiding. Only a very small portion of the participants (23%) has experienced only knowledge sharing cases in their cooperative career. Mainly, participants at the lower level experienced knowledge hiding and sharing, whereas, participants at the managerial level enjoyed mostly knowledge sharing. Also, the participants who experienced knowledge sharing developed positive feelings and relationships with their colleagues, whereas, participants who experience knowledge hiding developed negative feelings and relationships with their colleagues. The leaders ignored the existence of KM and its value, and promoted secrecy and individualism in an organization, which offers services mainly to the domestic and broader banking markets. The cooperative banking system is recommended to adopt and nurture practices with orientation on KM to improve the organizational conditions and productivity. Future studies examining individuals' experiences, perceptions and other factors leading to knowledge sharing and hiding, as well as KM in other business sectors or in other countries may give a deeper insight on the theory of the field.

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Appendix:

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

You mentioned that you have had experiences on knowledge sharing and hiding in your workplace as well as some prior knowledge on knowledge management.

Can you tell me about your experiences about knowledge sharing and hiding in your workplace? What happened?

Could you say something more about that? Can you give a more detailed description of what happened?

What did you do? How do you remember this/these case(s)? How did you experience it/them?

What did you feel about it/them? How was your emotional reaction to this/these event(s)?

Did you try to do anything about that?

What do you think about it/them? What is your opinion of what happened? How do you judge it/them today?

