



# Knowledge withholding intentions in teams: The roles of normative conformity, affective bonding, rational choice and social cognition



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## ABSTRACT

The decision of members in a knowledge-intensive team to withhold their knowledge may threaten the performance of the team. To address the problem of knowledge resource risk in project teams, we maintain that it is important to understand why team members choose to withhold their knowledge, conceptualized as knowledge-withholding intentions. In line with the literature on effort withholding, the research on multifoci relations between justice perceptions and social exchanges, and social cognitive theory, we proposed that the social exchange relationships that individuals form in the workplace, their perceptions of justice, and their knowledge withholding self-efficacy would influence their knowledge-withholding intentions. Through a survey of 227 information system development team workers, we found that all social exchange relationship variables had a significant impact on knowledge-withholding intentions. However, the justice perception variables only indirectly influenced knowledge-withholding intentions through the mediation of social exchange relationships. In addition, one of the task variables, task interdependence, influenced knowledge withholding intentions through the mediation of knowledge withholding self-efficacy. Our results contribute to the knowledge management literature by providing a better understanding of the antecedents of knowledge withholding. We also offer suggestions for future research utilizing the framework of Kidwell and Bennett (1993) to study effort and knowledge withholding.

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## 1. Introduction

Many factors combine to determine the performance of a knowledge-intensive project team. One critical determinant is whether the team as a whole can acquire strong collective knowledge gleaned and integrated from individual members' expertise. Some roadblocks, called "knowledge risks," have to be overcome to achieve this collective knowledge. For a typical knowledge-intensive project team like an information system development (ISD) team, Reich et al. identified several knowledge risks that greatly influence the performance of ISD projects. Two distant knowledge risks, knowledge resource risk and

structural risk, determine how the other three proximal risk factors (i.e., organizational support, management practice, and project change) influence project performance. Among these risks, knowledge resource risk is especially important, since elements inherent in knowledge resources, such as team members' competence, expertise, and knowledge, are critical to organizational support and management practice risks, both of which wield great impact on the project's process and performance [1].

There are two common explanations for the lack of knowledge resources. First, the team as a whole may lack the expertise and knowledge required for the project. Second, team members may for some reason withhold their knowledge, showing an unwillingness to contribute the most valuable part of their expertise to the ISD project. In the first situation, a lack of expertise or knowledge is basically an issue of talent management. Research has explored issues such as personnel recruitment, development, and training [2]. Little attention has been given to the second situation of knowledge-withholding intentions (KWI). Knowledge, with its contextual nature, is often implicit, which makes it difficult to identify or evaluate a person's knowledge contribution. The very difficulty of identification may in turn engender more KWI. Since it is difficult to detect knowledge-withholding behaviors, it would be reasonable to assume that such behaviors, as well as KWI,

*Abbreviations:* AVE, average variance extracted; CFI, comparative fit index; DJ, distributive justice; IJ, interactional justice; ISD, information system development; KWI, knowledge-withholding intentions; KWSE, knowledge withholding self-efficacy; LMX, leader-member exchange; MIS, management information systems; PJ, procedural justice; POS, perceived organizational support; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SCT, social cognitive theory; SEM, structural equation modeling; SET, social exchange theory; SRMR, standardized root mean square residual; TI, task interdependence; TV, task visibility; TMX, team-member exchange.

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are widespread. Very few studies have investigated KWI, particularly with regard to its potential antecedents [3–5].

Prior studies on knowledge sharing have tended to probe from comparatively positive perspectives, basing research models on theories of trust, social capital, reward expectation, task–technology fit, or information system success [6–9]. However, very few studies have approached the topic from an effort-withholding perspective to explain why people do not contribute their knowledge. In conceptualizing KWI, we contend that knowledge withholding is not simply the absence of knowledge sharing. Instead, KWI is the intentional attempt to withhold or conceal knowledge that may be able to contribute to a team's performance. Behaviorally, knowledge withholding and a lack of knowledge sharing may appear quite similar, but the drivers behind KWI and a lack of knowledge sharing are strikingly different. While a lack of knowledge sharing is mainly driven by unfamiliarity with the subject and lack of time [10], knowledge withholding may be caused by a number of different reasons. With this notion in mind, we try to identify antecedents of knowledge withholding from the perspective of effort withholding.

In fact, using the two-factor theory [11] as an analogy may well explain the difference between KWI and knowledge sharing. Factors influencing KWI can be viewed as hygiene factors, while those influencing knowledge sharing can be viewed as motivators. The absence of some factors may cause members to withdraw knowledge contribution, but the presence of those factors may not necessarily encourage knowledge sharing. Therefore, we propose that due to different antecedents, knowledge withholding and knowledge sharing may display independent patterns of relationships with other variables. Indeed, prior studies on knowledge withholding and hiding [3,5] have proposed several KWI antecedents, which differ from the antecedents of knowledge sharing [12]. For example, prior knowledge sharing studies have seldom focused on variables such as justice perceptions, social exchange variables, and task variables, even though the literature on effort withholding suggests these variables are highly useful when tracing the origin of knowledge withholding [13,14]. Therefore, our first research question investigated the origins of KWI from the perspective of effort withholding: *What are the antecedents of KWI in teams?*

Researchers have analyzed the impact of a wide diversity of variables on effort withholding, including group characteristics, task characteristics, personality, interpersonal relationships, responsibility, and norms [14–17]. Each variable is in itself fruitful but somewhat fragmented when the whole picture of effort withholding is to be considered. Synthesizing different bodies of literature from economics, sociology, and psychology, Kidwell and Bennett [13] developed a comprehensive model and proposed that the behavior of effort withholding is triggered by three factors: the extent to which a team member wants to conform to normative expectations based on existing organizational justice (normative conformity); how well interpersonal bonds, or bonds between different parties, are maintained based on social exchange (affective bonding); and how a choice to withhold after considering the task features is deemed as rational (rational choice).

Comprehensive as their model is, Kidwell and Bennett seemed to assume that key variables in each dimension work independently. More recent studies in related research streams and inconsistent findings of studies based on Kidwell and Bennett's framework motivated us to revise their effort-withholding framework. First, from research on justice perceptions and work-related outcomes, scholars have suggested that justice variables influence employees' actions and reactions through social exchange variables [18–20]. Second, in the dimension of rational choice, researchers used task variables as a way to determine how individuals make rational choices. However, the inconsistent findings of effects of task variables on effort withholding suggest the possibility of mediators. Although the degrees of task interdependence (TI) and task visibility (TV) seem to be objective, whether team members withhold their effort in knowledge contribution still depends on whether they are confident in being able to do so without being noticed. Drawing on social cognitive theory (SCT) [21], we developed and proposed

knowledge-withholding self-efficacy (KWSE) as a mediator between task variables and KWI. Thus, a further investigation of relationships among variables of the three dimensions is warranted to better understand how individual perceptions and social cognitions influence KWI, an immediate antecedent to knowledge-withholding behaviors. We therefore asked a second research question: *What are the relationships among KWI antecedents based on Kidwell and Bennett's framework of effort withholding?*

In examining some of the antecedents of KWI and the mechanism through which those antecedents influence KWI, this study aims to contribute to research and practice in knowledge management. Through the study findings, researchers and practitioners can be more aware of the causes of KWI and mitigate its risk in knowledge-intensive project teams.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

The research model in Fig. 1 depicts the antecedents of KWI based on the framework of Kidwell and Bennett. We modified their framework by incorporating multifoci relations of organizational justice, social exchange, and social cognition of KWSE. We propose that three distinct types of justice perceptions relate to KWI not only directly, but also indirectly through corresponding social exchange relationship variables of perceived organization support (POS), leader–member exchange (LMX), and team–member exchange (TMX). In addition, the influence of task variables on KWI is mediated by a social cognitive factor, KWSE.

### 2.1. Effort withholding and knowledge withholding

Effort withholding refers to the likelihood that an individual will give less than full effort on a job-related task [13]. It is a common denominator of duty shirking, job neglect, social loafing, and free-riding [13]. All of these behaviors have one thing in common: an individual's withholding effort while performing a task. While shirking and job neglect occur more often when employees work alone, social loafing and free-riding take place in a group context.

Knowledge withholding is a specific form of effort withholding. Since it is difficult to ask individuals about actual knowledge-withholding behaviors, we used a proximal variable, KWI, to describe the likelihood a person would give less than full effort in contributing knowledge that may potentially influence performance. The contextual nature of knowledge and individual beliefs (e.g., psychological ownership) distinguish knowledge withholding from other forms of effort withholding. Although some forms of knowledge can be codified, other forms of knowledge are implicit and cannot easily be expressed. Haldin-Herrgard [22] used the metaphor of an iceberg to describe organizations' knowledge resources. Whereas structured, explicit knowledge is the visible top of the iceberg, tacit knowledge resources, such as intuition, rule-of-thumb, gut feeling, and personal skills, are usually beneath the surface. Individuals are the primary repositories of tacit knowledge in organizations. It is therefore difficult to detect whether someone has implicit knowledge and easy for him or her to hide implicit knowledge. Furthermore, what differentiates withholding knowledge from social loafing, free-riding, or shrinking may be the notion of “psychological ownership.” Researchers have suggested that by contributing a part of one's unique knowledge, one gives up sole claim to the benefits stemming from such knowledge [23]. For example, Peng found that if individuals believe they own the knowledge they use in work settings, they are more likely to hide knowledge [5].

### 2.2. Antecedents of withholding effort

Researchers have tried to predict effort withholding using different variables such as task characteristics, personality, group characteristics, equity perceptions, interpersonal relationships, and norms [14–17,24]. Kidwell and Bennett formulated a systematic framework that was widely adopted and empirically validated in the research stream of effort

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