



# The effects of individual motivations and social capital on employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the importance of knowledge in today's competitive world, an understanding of how to enhance employee knowledge sharing has become critical. This study develops an integrated model to understand key factors of employee knowledge sharing intentions through constructs prescribed by two established knowledge management research streams, namely, those concerning individual motivations and social capital. This study classifies employee knowledge sharing intentions as either tacit or explicit and investigates whether the level of the determinants and their influences differ between the two. The research model is tested with survey data collected from 2010 employees in multiple industries. Analysis results show that the proposed model significantly explains the variance of employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions. This finding indicates that the model's unified perspective enhances our knowledge of how to improve employee knowledge sharing. The new findings reveal that organizational rewards have a negative effect on employees' tacit knowledge sharing intentions but a positive influence on their explicit knowledge sharing intentions. The analysis results confirm that reciprocity, enjoyment, and social capital contribute significantly to enhancing employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions. Additionally, these factors have more positive effects on tacit than on explicit knowledge intentions. The implications of the new findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Knowledge sharing is critical to a firm's success in today's highly competitive environment (Grant, 1996). Effectively encouraging employees to share useful knowledge across the organization can increase and sustain a firm's competitive advantages (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996; Liu & Phillips, 2011). Numerous studies on organization and knowledge management (KM) have proven that employee knowledge sharing enhances firm performance such as absorptive capacity and innovation capability (e.g., Liao, Fei, & Chen, 2007; Liu & Phillips, 2011). Choi, Lee, and Yoo (2010) have shown that knowledge sharing among team members is essential in maintaining high levels of group and organizational productivity.

Since employees' knowledge sharing intentions are one of the strong predictors of actual employee knowledge sharing behaviour (Ajzen, 1988, 1991), many researchers have studied its various

contributing factors. Previous studies, however, seem to be limited in that they did not address the type of knowledge to be shared. Knowledge shared among employees can be classified as either tacit or explicit (Dhanaraj, Lyles, Steensma, & Tihanyi, 2004; Nonaka, 1994; Reychav & Weisberg, 2009). Tacit knowledge is not easily codified or articulated because it is embedded in an individual's brain or experience, such as know-how or skill (Nonaka, 1994). On the other hand, explicit knowledge is easily expressed and communicated in the form of written documents, such as reports or manuals (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Therefore, tacit knowledge is harder than explicit knowledge to share among employees, since sharing it costs significantly more time and effort (Dhanaraj et al., 2004; Ipe, 1998; Reychav & Weisberg, 2010). This implies that the knowledge sharing enablers of previous studies may have had different effects on tacit or explicit knowledge sharing intentions because people are likely to adjust their knowledge sharing intentions according to the different resource requirements of tacit and explicit knowledge sharing activities. Therefore, the objective of this study is to re-examine the impact of major knowledge sharing antecedents of employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions.

The major knowledge sharing antecedents to be re-examined fall into two categories: individual and social. Within the individual

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category, employees' extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are the basis of the growth of their knowledge sharing intentions (Hung, Durcikova, Lai, & Lin, 2011; Hung, Lai, & Chang, 2011; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005; Lin, 2007a). Prior KM studies have pointed out organizational rewards and reciprocity as salient extrinsic motivation (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Chennamaneni, Teng, & Raja, 2012; Lin, 2007b) and enjoyment as critical intrinsic motivation (Chennamaneni et al., 2012; Hung et al., 2011b; Lin, 2007a; Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Regarding the social category, since knowledge sharing consists of social interactions between employees (Chow & Chan, 2008; Lin, 2007a) and such interactions are influenced by the relationships between individuals (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), employee social capital has been known to play a major role in forming their knowledge sharing intentions (Chang & Chuang, 2011; Chow & Chan, 2008; He, Qiao, & Wei, 2009). Since the impact of these knowledge sharing antecedents on tacit or explicit knowledge sharing has not been yet verified in the literature, this study tries to answer the following three research questions:

- (i) What are the effects of individual motivation factors such as organization rewards, reciprocity, and enjoyment on employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions?
- (ii) What are the effects of social capital on employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions?
- (iii) How do individual motivation factors and social capital differ in their respective impacts on employees' tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions?

This remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the study's theoretical background. Section 3 describes the research model and hypotheses. Section 4 explains the research methodology. Section 5 examines the research results. Section 6 discusses the implications of the results. Section 7 provides the conclusion and limitations of this research.

## 2. Theoretical background

This section casts light on the theoretical background for our study's major constructs: tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions, individual motivations, and social capital.

### 2.1. Tacit and explicit knowledge sharing intentions

Von Hippel (1994, p. 430) defined the concept of information "stickiness" as "the incremental expenditure required to transfer a given unit of information to a specified locus in a form usable by a given information seeker." Tacit knowledge, by nature, is stickier than explicit knowledge (Von Hippel, 1994). Accordingly, it is natural for employees to adjust their willingness to share knowledge according to the stickiness of the knowledge to be shared, requesting adequate extrinsic or intrinsic benefits in exchange. Moreover, some researchers have suggested that explicit and tacit knowledge have different economic values (Reychav & Weisberg, 2010). Explicit knowledge is regarded as relatively less expensive because it is easy to transfer to others. By contrast, tacit knowledge carries a higher value since it is concerned with direct contact and the observation of employee behaviours and related to more complex ways of acquiring knowledge from other employees. Thus, by nature, tacit knowledge is more difficult to share than explicit knowledge, which makes tacit knowledge costlier to share.

Osterloh and Frey (2000) also distinguished between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing and argued that the different types of motivations (extrinsic and intrinsic) are important in sharing the two kinds of knowledge. Smith (2001) compared the distinctive roles of the two types of knowledge sharing and indicated a

supportive and interactive learning environment as the major factor in the success of both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing. Becerra, Lunnan, and Huemer (2008) also found that the transfers of tacit and explicit knowledge, respectively, have distinct trust and risk profiles. Reychav and Weisberg (2009) showed that employees who are willing to share their tacit knowledge are likely to be willing to share their explicit knowledge in order to earn monetary and non-monetary benefits. Huang, Davison, and Gu (2011) explored the impact of trust and guanxi orientation on the intention to share explicit and tacit knowledge in Chinese firms and argued that the two have different levels of impact, depending on the type of knowledge.

In summary, the existing literature shows that the classification of knowledge is worth applying to deepen our understanding of employees' knowledge sharing intentions. To the extent that explicit knowledge sharing and tacit knowledge sharing are inherently different, they are likely related to different levels of organizational rewards, enjoyment, and social capital. However, no prior study has empirically verified the relative effects of organizational rewards, enjoyment, or social capital on employees' intentions to share different types of knowledge. In our study, tacit knowledge sharing intention refers to the degree to which one believes that one will engage in a tacit knowledge sharing act, while explicit knowledge sharing intention is defined as the degree to which one believes one will engage in an explicit knowledge sharing act (Bock et al., 2005).

### 2.2. Individual motivations

Many KM studies have demonstrated the value of studying intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Since employee motivation is a main concern of any manager, it has been one of the most studied factors in KM (Bock et al., 2005; Hung et al., 2011a; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). According to Stenmark (2001), knowledge sharing seldom occurs without strong individual motivation. Motivation is one of the most important factors influencing employees' intentions to share their knowledge, regardless of the type of knowledge to be transferred (Vera-Muñoz, Ho, & Chow, 2006). Especially, rational action theory regards social interaction, such as knowledge sharing, as social exchange (Scott, 2000). The benefits of social exchange include various forms, either monetary (e.g., bonus, promotion) or non-monetary (e.g., enjoyment, reciprocity) (Scott, 2000). The salient benefits an individual employee can receive from knowledge sharing are organizational rewards, reciprocity, and enjoyment (Lin, 2007a). Such categories are useful because the effects of individual motivations on knowledge sharing intentions can be analysed in depth based on different exchange relationships.

Previous studies on individual motivations have identified two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Externally motivated employees are driven by the benefits and rewards derived from sharing their knowledge (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Extrinsic motivation can be captured by organizational rewards and reciprocity (Hung et al., 2011a; Kankanhalli et al., 2005). However, there have been mixed arguments over the effects of extrinsic motivation. Organizational rewards are usually given to a knowledge provider by organizational compensation systems as a kind of external stimulus based on the exchange relationship between employers and employees (Seba, Rowley, & Lambert, 2012). Some studies have suggested that extrinsic incentives motivate knowledge sharing (Bonner, Hastie, Sprinkle, & Young, 2000; Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Kwok & Gao, 2005; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998; Severinov, 2001), but others have insisted that such incentives can have negative effects (Bock & Kim, 2002; Bock et al., 2005; Hau & Kim, 2011). Still other studies have reported that organizational rewards have no effect on employees' knowledge sharing intentions (Hung et al., 2011b; Lin,

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