

# Explicit and Tacit Knowledge: To Share or Not to Share

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## INTRODUCTION

The question of whether or not it is “worthwhile” for employees to share their knowledge has received a great deal of attention in the literature, which focuses on the technological factors that motivate knowledge sharing (Duffy, 2000). However, the ethical aspect regarding the question of knowledge ownership is discussed in only a partial way in Wang’s (2004) model, where he examines employees’ desire to share (or not to share) the knowledge they possess. This internal conflict is based on employees’ having to choose between their own personal interests and their ethical understanding about organizational ownership of all employee-based knowledge. This article will elaborate on and examine the implications of knowledge sharing at the individual level. Employees, who manage to find the balance between their own personal interests and their ethical understanding about organizational ownership of employee-based knowledge, will engage in a high rate of knowledge sharing activities in the organization.

*Goals of Managing Organizational Knowledge Sharing.* An organization’s desire to manage its knowledge sharing activities is based on the need to capture, catalog and store the organization’s knowledge and transform it into knowledge that is both easily and immediately accessible to the organization and its members (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000). The goal of knowledge sharing is to support and encourage the creation, transference, application and use of knowledge within the organization (Reychav & Weisberg, 2005). Scholars, researchers and practitioners alike express an increasing interest in the subject of organizational knowledge sharing between the individual employee and the organization, and among employees themselves (Almashari, Zairi, & Alathari, 2002).

*Types of Knowledge.* One of the classifications of organizational knowledge differentiates between two types of knowledge: *explicit knowledge* and *tacit knowledge* (Polanyi, 1958); *explicit knowledge* represents the knowledge that is accessible to all organization employees, while *tacit knowledge* represents the personal knowledge possessed by individual employees. Organizations seek to obtain employees’ tacit

knowledge and convert it into explicit knowledge, which can then be easily transferred to the organization’s technological systems and networks. In this manner, the knowledge is distributed throughout the entire organization (Inkpen & Dinur, 1998; Ruppel & Harrington, 2001), thereby increasing the organization’s human capital (its employees).

*Conflicts of Interest.* Organizations invest in developing their human capital (Nahpiet & Ghoshal, 1998). As a result, employees expand their knowledge and expertise in order to create a personal competitive advantage within the organization and the market (Carlile, 2002). Knowledge is a resource and individuals who possess knowledge use it to acquire positions of power and control both within the organization and outside of the organization. Therefore, organizations that attempt to gain their employees’ knowledge (mainly of the tacit type) and make it accessible may, in the process, create a conflict of interests between the individual who possesses the knowledge and the organization that is interested in acquiring this knowledge (Storey & Barnett, 2000).

Hence, the main question is: Why would employees be motivated to share their personal knowledge with the organization at the risk of losing their relative power and advantage over the organization and the market? This question is even more complicated in light of the employee’s other conflicting considerations: the understanding that the organization has ownership rights over the personal knowledge the employee acquires while employed by the organization, conflicting with employees’ desire to realize their own personal interests by achieving a position of power/status.

The advancement and development of information and communication technologies have expanded organizations’ formal capabilities regarding knowledge transference (Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001). These technologies have also served to encourage the organization to centralize and control their information, based on the perception that knowledge belongs to the organization (Brynjolfsson, 1994). However, as soon as the organization is interested in and begins to operate according to norms and procedures, including the use of technological tools to transfer organizational knowledge, conflicts may arise within the organization at the employee level. These conflicts most often involve employees who possess a significant amount of organizational knowledge.

These employees may experience a conflict when they realize that they have to disseminate and store their knowledge within the organization in order to achieve a competitive advantage in the market at the risk of losing their own personal power and status within the organization (Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001).

On the one hand, the accepted norm regarding knowledge sharing in organizations claims that all knowledge, such as ideas, processes, innovations, documentation, and computer programs developed and created by employees during their time of employment with the organization, belongs to the organization rather than to the individuals who initiated it (Constant, Kiesler, & Sproull, 1994).

This concept isn't stated in any contract or agreement signed between the employee and the organization, but is implied and understood through the organization's ethical values system, based on the idea that organizational knowledge is an asset that belongs to the organization.

On the other hand, the tacit knowledge residing within the sole control of an individual employee is considered personal knowledge of a specific type, as it is based on the subjective understanding, intuition, feelings, ideals, experience, values and emotions rooted in the individual (Polanyi, 1966, p.7).

## BACKGROUND

Explicit knowledge, characterized by structured and constant knowledge, may be documented and distributed through technological systems and networks (Duffy, 2000; Martensson, 2000). Technological tools, such as the Internet, computerized libraries, documentation systems, and electronic group applications, all contribute to the transfer of knowledge within organizations (Tampose, 1996). However, the main contribution of these technological tools is to increase the compatibility of diverse organizational factors by reducing physical and personal constraints (DeLong, 1996). Even so, the existence of technological tools in an organization doesn't necessarily mean that employees will utilize them for the purpose of sharing knowledge. The extent of the actual use of technological tools depends upon the extent of the employees' motivation to utilize the technology (O'Dell & Grayson, 1998). Therefore, organizations have begun to understand that technology isn't a complete solution to knowledge sharing problems, because the way to promote knowledge sharing is to focus on the direct factors that effect employee behavior (Poole, 2000).

*Ethics and Knowledge Sharing.* Employees' ethical perceptions regarding the organization's ownership of its employees' knowledge affects their tendency to share their explicit knowledge with the organization. On the other hand, employees' willingness to share their tacit knowledge is based

on their personal interests and the social and economic benefits they receive in exchange for sharing knowledge (Constant et al., 1994). Employees' transfer of tacit knowledge in the organization, based on their experience and expertise, may stem from a variety of considerations regarding personal interests, according to which employees believe that their explicit knowledge belongs to themselves, rather than to the organization. Organizations frequently engage in knowledge transfer that relates to technical aspects of the organization; this serves as an example of standards or documents that characterize products or services produced by the organization. This type of knowledge transfer is an accepted ethical activity of knowledge owned by the organization.

*Knowledge: Organizational or Employee Ownership?*

The term "ownership" is widely used in the fields of law (Boyer, 1981), philosophy (Locke, 1978) and psychology (Markus, 1984). The distinction between organizational and employee ownership of knowledge was first presented by Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001).

1. **Organizational ownership of knowledge and expertise-related assets:** An employee's understanding regarding organizational ownership of knowledge-based assets mainly relates to the employee's explicit knowledge, which may be easily identified by the organization. Social Identity Theory can explain employees' ongoing behavior regarding the transfer of knowledge to the organization as being based on employees' desire to fulfill the goals of the organization they belong to (Tyler, 1999). Employees view their colleagues as necessary sources of information upon which completion of organizational tasks depend. Therefore, coworkers turn to one another in order to receive direction and guidance. Employees' feelings of belongingness and identification about their organization affect their level of knowledge sharing within the organization.
2. **Employee ownership of knowledge and expertise-related assets:** Employees' willingness to share their knowledge with the organization can be explained by two classical psychological theories:
  - a. **Association theory:** Numerous psychological studies dealing with employee ownership of knowledge are based on Association Theory (Heider, 1958), which states that the individual who worked to create the knowledge asset and who, ultimately, controls the knowledge in the present time and also in the past, is the one who "owns" that knowledge asset. This theory suggests that because employees create the knowledge, they also own that knowledge. A good example of this differentiation between ownership and knowledge is conceptualized by

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