

# Trust is a Factor Determining the Sharing of Knowledge Among Employees of Modern Organizations

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**Abstract:** In the conditions of a knowledge-based economy, the basic and necessary factor responsible for the transfer of this resource is organizational trust. Organizational trust triggers employees' willingness to cooperate to share knowledge. Without trust in the work environment, skepticism and reluctance to participate in the exchange of knowledge prevail among employees, which makes it difficult to use it in everyday activities. **Aim.** The aim of the article is to examine the relationship between trust and knowledge sharing due to the importance of these factors in building organizational effectiveness. **Method.** Quantitative research was carried out in Poland using the CAWI method. In order to carry out the research, an original survey questionnaire was prepared and distributed to respondents via the Internet. The research group consisted of 358 people. **Results:** The research results revealed differences between the socio-demographic characteristics of research participants and the factors of trust in the management staff and members of the employee team that favor knowledge sharing. **Conclusions:** The research results expand knowledge of the conditions that should be met in an organization so that its members can gain confidence in sharing knowledge. Knowledge obtained from the analysis of own research results may be useful for the organization. It allows you to increase your superiors' awareness of the need to make efforts and take actions to build trust among employees.

**Keywords:** Trust, Sharing Knowledge, Managers, Employee Team

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## 1. Introduction

In a knowledge-based economy, knowledge resources are of great importance for the efficient functioning of an organization. Skillful management increases the transparency of all activities. Processing and transferring knowledge prevents it from shrinking, and what's more, it increases knowledge (Bulińska-Stangrecka, 2018). The efficiency of information flow depends on the attitudes adopted by employees. In an atmosphere of mutual support, cooperation and openness to the exchange of knowledge, bonds and trust between team members are developed. The article is of a theoretical and empirical nature. The first part explains the essence of organizational trust and characterizes the concept of knowledge sharing. Next, the research methodology is described and its results are presented. The aim of the study is to analyze the relationship between the factors of trust in the superior and team members and the socio-demographic characteristics of the study participants. The presented research results provide knowledge about the conditions that the organization must meet towards employees in order to make them trust in sharing knowledge.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Essence of Organizational Trust

Effective solution of problems that a team of employees has to face requires access to information and its rapid flow. In order to expect a positive result in this respect, trust between the members of the organization is necessary. Some of its employees sometimes find it hard to believe that they can trust someone. In order to convince ourselves and others that trust enables people to achieve common goals, it is necessary to build it within the organization.

When considering the concept of organizational trust, it can be related to the general assessment of the organization in terms of caring for its internal stakeholders, being honest and open towards them, creating the opportunity to identify with it. Trust in the organization is associated with the belief that the organization conducts its activities effectively in order to increase the level of satisfaction of its employees with their duties (Rudziewicz, 2017). Trust is built based on the quality of work and the authority of the manager. By paying more attention to building trust, it inspires employees to take action, increasing their level of commitment to everyday duties. This approach to subordinates allows them to believe in their abilities, personal potential, as well as talents and passion for the profession. Trust contributes to increasing employee loyalty, efficiency and shaping a positive attitude towards the company if their superiors actively participate in building a climate of trust, focusing on expanding their managerial competences, creating relationships based on truth and values, and communicating good will towards ordinary employees (Rudziewicz, 2016). Trust is compared to an important

relationship between an employee and his or her superior, in which both parties undertake to fulfill the obligations imposed on them by the employer. Organizational trust concerns the mutual fulfillment of their obligations by the parties involved in the interaction (Kapuścik, 2015). It can be present in a horizontal and vertical arrangement. Horizontal trust occurs among people cooperating in the workplace when they work at the same organizational level. Vertical trust occurs when there are relationships between employees and their superiors, top management and their superiors, or members of the entire organization (Bugdol, 2010). Good management of an organization should come down to fulfilling the integration function between all its members. Good management is about maximizing the company's value, communicating and fulfilling promises to employees, and enabling them to identify with the workplace. Trust is achieved by building good relationships between team members and between the manager and employees (Józefowicz, 2015). The bond makes employees feel greater trust in other members of the organization and engage in the process of mutual implementation in joint work, contributing to building internal motivation to achieve greater work efficiency. Companies' activities aimed at bringing employees closer to achieving this goal should contribute to strengthening organizational trust, which, according to the authors of the Organizational Trust Index, means "the ubiquitous belief that the organization in its communication and behavior is competent, open and honest, committed, reliable and deserving of identification with its goals, norms and values" (Shockley-Zalabak et al, 2010). Based on previous research in the field of management sciences, it is indicated that the level of organizational trust depends, among others, on the mutual interactions that take place between organization members, the effectiveness of communication, employee competences and their motives (Bulińska-Stangrecka). Certainly, management behavior, regardless of management level, has a major impact on the development of organizational trust. Undoubtedly, what is important is the tendency to express empathy towards others, to genuinely show respect for each other, and to ensure compliance with the principle of fair treatment of employees in various situations that occur in the workplace (Józefowicz, 2015).

## 2.2 Sharing Knowledge - Characteristics of the Concept

Modern organizations achieve success on the market in a dynamically changing reality thanks to knowledge about the market, potential and commitment of employees for the efficiency of their operations. These factors are directly or indirectly related to knowledge. Perceiving knowledge as a determinant of the efficient functioning of the organization results from the experience and skills of employees and constitutes a serious challenge for the organization on the way to growth. C. Sołek emphasizes, following Bagshaw, that if knowledge is not translated into action, it will not be used correctly and continuously, and therefore it will not bring benefits to the organization. In order for it to be considered a company resource, a special role is played by those members of the organization who take part in its creation and transfer (Sołek, 2012). If there is a belief in the existence of individual or team knowledge and it is possible to recognize who has it, it is said that the organization has conditions for sharing knowledge. Sharing knowledge in an organization is, according to J. O. Paliszkiwicz, a process consisting in making information available to employees who need and seek it, or the flow of knowledge between co-workers or teams of employees within the company (Paliszkiwicz, 2007). Therefore, sharing knowledge is two-sided and interactive, during which people who decide to participate exchange it with each other. As S. Spałek and his colleagues note after M. Ipe, "the person transmitting knowledge does so consciously and voluntarily, at the same time relinquishing ownership of the knowledge in favor of sharing it with the recipient and with the intention that it will be understood, assimilated and used appropriately by him" (Spałek et al, 2018). Therefore, sharing knowledge leads to the acquisition of new knowledge or the effective application of existing knowledge (Flaszewska, 2019). According to G. von Krogh, by sharing knowledge one can notice a change in the level of knowledge and behavior of people who disseminate it and who can use it (Rudawska, 2013).

## 3. Methodology

The aim of the study was to verify the relationship between organizational trust factors and knowledge sharing in Polish organizations. It was checked what factors of trust in the superior and team members influence decisions about the willingness to share knowledge for the organization in which they are employed. Relationships were determined between the answers provided by respondents and their characteristics in terms of gender, age, seniority and size of the organization. Respondents from all over Poland took part in the study. The research was conducted in the first quarter of 2023 using online technology, anonymously. The CAWI method used a survey questionnaire sent to respondents via the Internet to answer the questions. Ultimately, the research group consisted of 358 people. The characteristics of the study sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the research group**

Features of the study group		N	%
Gender of employees	females	188	52,5
	males	170	47,5
	SUM	358	100
Seniority	Up to 1 year	6	1,67
	2-5 years	33	9,21
	6-15 years	115	32,12
	16-25 years	91	25,41
	26 and more	113	31,56
	SUM	358	100

Source: own study

$\chi^2$  independence tests were performed for the given research sample. The level of statistical significance was assumed to be  $p < 0.05$ . The calculations were performed with the statistical program STATISTICA 13.3 by Statsoft. Based on the study, it was assessed which factors of trust in the superior and members of the employee team translate into the willingness to participate in the exchange of knowledge with members of the organization. Additionally, the aim of the study was to determine whether the nature of the answer to the question depends on the socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed group.

For the purposes of this study, the following research hypotheses were formulated and verified:

1. Socio-demographic factors of respondents differentiate their answers to the question: what attitudes and behaviors do superiors demonstrate to strengthen employees' trust in sharing knowledge?
2. Factors in the dimension of the characteristics of the employee team determine the involvement of employees in the exchange of knowledge and are closely related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents participating in these studies.

#### 4. Results

Building employee involvement in sharing knowledge is one of the challenges for direct superiors of modern organizations, because the effectiveness of activities in this area largely depends on them. One of the foundations of a supervisor's success is gaining the trust of employees.

In order to verify H1, the correlations were examined between the respondents' answers in the context of specifying the factors of trust in the superior, which are intended to inspire them to share knowledge, and the respondents' socio-demographic factors. It is essential that managers have the willingness and appropriate competences to provide employees with opportunities to be active in the exchange of knowledge. What conditions managers in Polish organizations create to gain employees' trust and encourage them to share knowledge are shown by these research results, which are included in the tables below. This hypothesis was largely confirmed.

**Table 2: Relationships between trust factors in the superior that influence knowledge sharing and the gender of the respondents**

Supervisor's behavior that inspires trust among employees to share knowledge	Sex %		The value of the statistic	
	Women	Men	Chi2( $\chi^2$ )	p
Encourages maintaining good relationships between team members	50,96	49,04	0,935	0,333
Builds a sense of shared responsibility for achieving goals	50,58	49,42	13,174	0,000
Individual approach to the employee, interest in his opinion	50,16	49,84	6,926	0,008
Inspires employees to act and achieve goals in line with his expectations	54,85	45,15	1,537	0,214

Supervisor's behavior that inspires trust among employees to share knowledge	Sex %		The value of the statistic	
	Women	Men	Chi2( $\chi^2$ )	p
Reliably and sympathetically assesses employees' efforts and work results	46,79	53,21	16,910	0,000
Helps employees develop and professional career	51,43	48,57	7,399	0,006
Initiates contacts with team members after work	49,28	50,72	0,359	0,548

Source: own study

The results of testing the relationship between the supervisor's attitudes and behaviors listed in the table above and the respondents' gender indicate in four cases a positive, statistically significant relationship between the variables ( $p < 0.05$ ). This means that the observed distribution of observations within variables 2,3,5,6 depends on the variable gender. The Chi2 test result showed differences between women and men in relation to these variables. Women are more likely to notice the above-mentioned competencies of the superior, which constitute the foundation of trust in sharing knowledge based on which the organization can function efficiently in a competitive environment. The position expressed by women regarding the tendencies shown by superiors to build a sense of co-responsibility for achieving goals proves the desire to build trust in it by positively motivating employees to work, encouraging them to actively participate in the exchange of knowledge and experiences, and presenting different points of view. Such involvement of employees in common successes becomes profitable for the organization, as it brings positive results, especially in the form of integration of team members, looking for ways to reach each other, and building awareness of conscientious fulfillment of one's duties. The summary of superiors' behavior also shows that an individual approach to an employee and interest in his opinion are very important for women; reliable, sympathetic assessment of employees' efforts and results. It can be concluded that superiors use such methods of approaching women to build trust in them and encourage them to take initiatives to exchange knowledge. Men believe significantly more often than women that providing employees with access to development and support in their professional career can have a positive impact and constitute an incentive to participate in the knowledge sharing process.

**Table 3: Relationships between trust factors in the supervisor that influence knowledge sharing and the respondents' work experience**

Supervisor's behavior that inspires trust among employees to share knowledge	Seniority					The value of the statistic	
	up to 1 year	2-5 years	6-15 years	16-25 years	26 and more	Chi2( $\chi^2$ )	p
Encourages maintaining good relationships between team members	2,30	7,28	32,57	27,59	30,27	8,507	0,074
Builds a sense of shared responsibility for achieving goals	1,74	9,59	33,43	24,71	30,52	11,030	0,026
Individual approach to the employee, interest in his opinion	1,87	10,28	29,28	27,10	31,46	15,764	0,003
Inspires employees to act and achieve goals in line with his expectations	1,27	1,27	40,51	23,63	33,33	65,728	0,000
Reliably and sympathetically assesses employees' efforts and work results	2,14	11,79	37,86	21,07	27,14	41,534	0,000
Helps employees develop and professional career	1,71	8,57	31,43	26,00	32,29	14,251	0,006
Initiates contacts with team members after work	0,00	31,88	47,83	5,80	14,49	76,471	0,000

Source: own study

The above results indicate that there is a significant statistical relationship between seniority and virtually all factors of trust in the superior that facilitate knowledge sharing. The only exception is factor 1, which does not differentiate the respondents' statements. It can be noticed that work experience in the range of 6 - 15 years differentiates the respondents most strongly in terms of trust in their superior in the context of sharing

knowledge if he or she displays behaviors characteristic of variables 2, 4, 6, 7. It should be assumed that superiors, out of concern for the activity of employees with longer work experience, expect them to share responsibility for achieving goals. This may result from the need to build awareness among employees that they are a key part of the organization, the success of which depends on their willingness to work and their involvement in acquiring the knowledge necessary to perform their duties at the workplace. When a superior inspires employees to take actions related to sharing knowledge and therefore achieving goals in line with his expectations, he can make them willing to be open to taking up challenges and overcoming the difficulties resulting from them. In the case of long-term employees who have proven their professionalism and enjoy a strong position in the workplace, the superior uses other motivators to encourage the sharing of knowledge, such as: initiating contacts with team members after work and offering help and support in career development.

Employees with 26 years of experience and more have great trust in their superiors and are willing to share knowledge if their superiors demonstrate behavior towards them consisting of: an individual approach to the employee, interest in his or her opinion, and when he or she helps in professional development. It follows from the above that employees have the right to trust their superior because he is aware of their competences and can count on better use of their potential.

Comparing the differences in the statements of employees with short work experience - a maximum of 5 years, it should be noted that with its increase confidence in sharing knowledge increases if the superior helps build it.

In order to verify H2, the relationships between the analyzed variables in the research area regarding trust factors in co-workers and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were examined. Trust in the employee team has a positive impact on the work efficiency of its members and the quality of cooperation between them in terms of engaging in knowledge exchange. What conditions must be met in a team so that its members are willing to share the necessary knowledge that the company needs to increase its chances of achieving business goals? The answers to this question are provided by the results obtained from this research, which are presented in the tables below. The results presented therein show that in most cases there is a statistically significant correlation between the analyzed variables and inform that this research hypothesis is true.

**Table 4: Relationships between the factors of trust in members of the employee team, conducive to knowledge sharing, and the gender of the respondents**

Actions of team members that build trust in sharing knowledge	Sex %		The value of the statistic	
	Women	Men	Chi2( $\chi^2$ )	p
Willingness to help each other	52,86	47,14	0,060	0,805
The team creates favorable conditions for fulfilling one's ambitions	49,06	50,94	5,014	0,025
Mutual appreciation of experience and knowledge	62,45	37,55	25,136	0,000
Openness to understanding the needs and problems of team members	62,95	37,05	26,119	0,000
Openness to new solutions and ideas	52,92	47,08	0,103	0,747
Openness to expressing one's own opinions and views	57,87	42,13	10,073	0,001

Source: own study

Based on the obtained research results, it was observed that women are significantly more likely than men to gain confidence in sharing knowledge if the team is characterized by the following features: mutual appreciation of experience and knowledge; openness to understanding the needs and problems of team members; openness to new solutions and ideas. Men are more inclined to exchange knowledge if the conditions in the team are conducive to fulfilling their own ambitions.

**Table 5: Relationships between the factors of trust in members of the employee team, conducive to sharing knowledge, and the work experience of the respondents**

Actions of team members that build trust in sharing knowledge	Seniority					The value of the statistic	
	Up to 1 year	2-5 years	6-15 years	16-25 years	26 and more	Chi2( $\chi^2$ )	P
Willingness to help each other	2,14	10,00	31,79	23,21	32,86	5,707	0,222
The team creates favorable conditions for fulfilling one's ambitions	0,00	10,49	25,84	32,21	31,46	51,395	0,000
Mutual appreciation of experience and knowledge	0,00	3,06	37,12	26,20	33,62	42,765	0,000
Openness to understanding the needs and problems of team members	2,68	5,80	29,02	36,61	25,89	48,522	0,000
Openness to new solutions and ideas	1,37	10,65	29,55	24,05	34,36	12,513	0,013
Openness to expressing one's own opinions and views	2,36	9,06	34,65	27,17	26,77	11,625	0,020

Source: own study

In terms of the work experience variable, statistically significant positive correlations ( $p < 0.05$ ) were revealed in relation to all trust factors towards the employee team, except point 1. Employees with 16-25 years of experience engage in knowledge exchange significantly more often than other respondents if the conditions in the team are conducive to fulfilling their own ambitions. People with 6-15 years of work experience are more willing to share knowledge when their experiences and knowledge are appreciated and they are open to expressing their own opinions and views.

Employees with long work experience (26 years and more) are significantly more likely to express readiness to share their knowledge with others if the team is open to new solutions and ideas.

## 5. Discussion

The research hypotheses set out in the article were confirmed and allowed to expand knowledge about the described issue. Based on the obtained research results, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between the analyzed factors of trust in the superior and members of the employee team in the context of knowledge sharing, and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents participating in the study. The research results clearly indicate differences between genders in the level of trust in the superior resulting from his positive attitude and behaviors that encourage sharing knowledge. Women's trust in the exchange of knowledge within the organization is greater than that of men and is the result of the attributes possessed by the superior. One example to support the above statement is the concept of Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Kathleen Ellis and Gaynelle Winograd (2000), which shows that management staff is more effective when they demonstrate skills, demonstrate openness, honesty, concern for employees and approach the performance of their duties reliably.

It can be concluded from this that women are more willing to share ideas, knowledge and experience when they are led by a leader who creates an atmosphere of trust by being open to subordinates. When a highly inspiring supervisor guides them on their way to achieving their professional goals and behaves freely, it triggers the desire to cooperate and maintain better relationships with each other, so that they want to work more productively.

Moreover, research indicates that men have significantly greater trust in their superiors when they reliably and sympathetically assess employees' efforts and work results. The results obtained from the research are consistent with the research of other authors regarding the impact of employee trust on knowledge sharing. In the context of key factors in relation to the discussed issue, it is possible to point out the current results of analyzes confirming the relationship between management support and employee participation in knowledge exchange. A. Cabrera, W.C. Collins, J.F. Salgado (2006) draw attention to the importance of the role that management is to play in building employee involvement in active participation in this process. Moreover, they emphasize that they should influence employees' positive perception of the importance of activities aimed at mutual transfer of knowledge that the organization needs.

Hsiu-Fen Lin and Gwo-Guang Lee (2004) emphasize that support from management is a necessary condition for shaping an organizational culture conducive to the effectiveness of these activities.

Based on the obtained research results, it can be concluded that the seniority of the respondents clearly differentiate their trust in the management regarding the behavior encouraging their subordinates to share knowledge. Employees with 6-15 years of work experience and 26 years or more of experience have significantly greater trust in their superiors. They are not newly employed, which means that, compared to other groups of employees, they may be more mature and aware of the competencies that a superior should have to make them trust in carrying out activities requiring cooperation in the workplace.

The results of previous research emphasize the role of trust as a factor supporting the improvement of the quality of the relationship between the superior and the subordinate, which is reflected in the mechanism of social exchange. The principle of reciprocity is at the basis of social exchange, and the employee, guided by it, should, in gratitude for the support shown to him, including the actions of his superior, creating conditions for the fulfillment of professional duties, repay him by actively participating in the exchange of knowledge for its application in real situations (Wnuk, 2020). To meet the organization's requirements and demonstrate loyalty to it, employees have specific expectations of management. They require positive attitudes and behaviors towards them, helping to create trust that determines the effective sharing of knowledge within the organization.

Based on the results obtained, it should also be noted that there are positive relationships between the analyzed socio-demographic factors and trust in members of the employee team. Women declare a higher level of trust in the team and, therefore, a greater participation in the exchange of knowledge, if colleagues appreciate their experiences and knowledge, there is openness in the team to understand the needs and problems of team members and the ability to express their own views. Men have a higher level of trust in the work team if the conditions in it are conducive to fulfilling their own ambitions. When assessing individual aspects of trust in the team, employees with experience are significantly more likely to engage in knowledge exchange: 6-15 years of work (mutual appreciation of experience and knowledge; openness to expressing one's own opinions and views), 16-25 years of work (the team creates favorable conditions for fulfilling one's ambitions; openness to understanding the needs and problems of team members), 26 and more years of work (openness to new solutions and ideas). These results are consistent with other studies cited in the literature review (Biesok, 2013), which show that women have a higher level of trust in their colleagues, which makes them willing to share knowledge with them. A similar position is expressed by people with greater work experience. They point to several reasons for active participation in knowledge exchange, resulting from trust in colleagues: they enjoy the recognition of their colleagues, they have the opportunity to implement their ideas in the team, their involvement is appreciated. A low level of trust occurs among young people with short work experience. They are reluctant to share knowledge due to low job satisfaction, poorer cooperation and lack of recognition in the team.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of the research was to determine the impact of socio-demographic factors on employees' tendency to trust management staff and co-workers, which determines the willingness to engage in active participation in the exchange of knowledge necessary in everyday work. The research results revealed differences between the characteristics of research participants and the factors of trust in other members of the organization. In order for employees who are research participants to trust them, certain conditions must be met that create an atmosphere conducive to strengthening the relationship between them. It follows that people will be willing to share their knowledge when their expectations are met by other members of the social interaction. The formation of organizational trust is influenced by the attitudes and behaviors displayed towards others, which result from having specific competences. Trust also appears when the person from whom it is expected is characterized by kindness, openness, reliability, and concern for others.

Taking into account the limitations resulting from the conducted research, it was found that the majority of study participants assessed a high level of trust in their superiors and the employee team thanks to the attitudes and behaviors they demonstrated (factors that build trust in sharing knowledge) proving their involvement in the process of including other employees in activities related to the knowledge sharing process. The author faces the challenge of conducting research on the impact of respondents' characteristics on trust in knowledge exchange in organizations due to their size, on a representative sample using a more extensive measurement tool.

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