

# Exploring Factors Triggering Individual Knowledge Hiding at the e-Commerce Operation Workplace

Jin Xue<sup>1,2</sup>, Matthew Tingchi Liu<sup>1</sup> and Hoi Ngan Loi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Macau, Macau SAR, China

<sup>2</sup>Suzhou Institute of Trade & Commerce, Suzhou, China

<sup>3</sup>Macao Polytechnic University, Macau SAR, China

[jinxue0620@hotmail.com](mailto:jinxue0620@hotmail.com)

[matthewl@um.edu.mo](mailto:matthewl@um.edu.mo)

[hnloi@ipm.edu.mo](mailto:hnloi@ipm.edu.mo)

**Abstract:** Knowledge often requires both experience (implicit knowledge) and exploration (explicit knowledge) (Park and Gabbard, 2018); the knowledge in the e-commerce industry is constantly changing. E-commerce companies must figure out knowledge hiding behaviors inside the organization and eliminate them. Although knowledge management and knowledge sharing implementation have been conducted in organizations academically and practically for many years, employees still share knowledge reluctantly. For instance, in an e-commerce company with multiple online shops, operators are reluctant to share knowledge with colleagues since the techniques and the newest information have huge impacts on the online sales, which will affect the operator's income and job stability in future (Han, Hampson and Wang, 2021). However, it is detrimental to the overall interests of the company because knowledge can bring competitive advantages to enterprises, and ensure that enterprises are distinguished from other organizations and occupy a favorable position in commercial competition. This paper investigated the antecedents of employees' knowledge hiding behavior from the knowledge type perspective and explores each path behind the individual type of knowledge: job insecurity path and timeliness path. At the same time, considering the existing fact that companies already have policies that encourage knowledge sharing but still have knowledge hiding behaviors, this paper also explores whether employees' perception toward corporate knowledge sharing strategies will affect the above two paths. The empirical data was collected from nearly 400 employees (frontline operators and junior managers) from six e-commerce business entities in China. The results verified that employees with a stronger perception of career plateau tend to hide tacit knowledge (derived from their experience) due to job insecurity behind. As to explicit knowledge, the higher the timeliness of the knowledge, the less likely it is that employees would like to hide their knowledge.

**Keywords:** implicit knowledge, explicit knowledge, career plateau, job insecurity, employees' strategy consensus, knowledge hiding

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## 1. Introduction

There is a proverb that says "*Graduated apprentice, Starved master*", which means that if a master teaches his apprentice, the master will lose his job. This ancient proverb exists in both Chinese and Japanese culture and reminds people to hide core knowledge from others in case they lose their jobs. Today, knowledge hiding is still very common in the workplace in both Asian and Western countries. According to Peng and Pierce (2015), a survey found that 76% of employees hide knowledge from colleagues with different forms in America. Even though collectivism is prevalent in China, the proportion of knowledge hiding workers is nearly 50%. Take the e-commerce industry as an example, knowledge has a huge impact on the company's online sales, which will affect the operator's income and job stability. People obtain knowledge via experience (implicit knowledge) and exploration (explicit knowledge). The knowledge in the e-commerce industry is constantly changing and updated quickly (CAICT, 2021).

Knowledge can bring competitive advantages to enterprises and ensure that enterprises occupy a favorable position in commercial competition; it is particularly prominent in knowledge-intensive enterprises (Connelly, 2012). Thus, knowledge can be regarded as an important resource in enterprise development, and its transition and transmission are worthy of investigation in research. According to Hobfoll (1989)'s Conservation of Resource Theory (COR theory), people have the motivation and intention to maintain their existing resources and seek new ones. Drawing on COR theory, since the knowledge will impact the company's online sales which will further affect their income and job stability, employees tend to hold or hide the knowledge to retain their advantages and pursue more corporate sources and personal benefits.

A myriad of literature has studied the antecedents and subsequence of knowledge sharing behavior in teams, and some results have been obtained, but knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing are not opposite concepts (Peng and Pierce, 2015). Studies in the field of organizational behavior show that negative behavior is not the

opposite of positive behavior, there are significant differences in behavioral motivation and influencing factors, and the impacts are asymmetric (Han, Hampson and Wang, 2021). Thus, the research on knowledge hiding is meaningful and growing.

This work hopes to detect the antecedents of employees' knowledge hiding behavior from the perspective of knowledge type and explore each path behind the individual type of knowledge: job insecurity path and timeliness path. At the same time, because companies already have policies that encourage knowledge sharing but still have knowledge hiding behaviors, we will also explore whether employees' perceptions toward corporate knowledge sharing strategies will affect the above two paths.

## 2. Theory and Hypotheses Development

As we mentioned above, the fact that knowledge is a very important resource for enterprises has been confirmed by scholars and practitioners (Connelly, 2012). To explain our two-path model of knowledge hiding in the e-commerce industry more clearly, we need to first present the fundamental expound. Knowledge refers to "a mixture of framework experience, values, background information and expert insights, which provides a framework for evaluating and integrating new experiences and information" (Han, Hampson and Wang, 2021). In this study, knowledge includes the information, ideas and expertise relevant for the tasks performed by organizational members.

Knowledge has been summarized into two types: implicit (or perceptual or tacit) knowledge, explicit (or conceptual) knowledge (Yang, 2003). Implicit knowledge refers to personal kinesthetics understanding of the world through direct experience and involvement in a particular situation. Explicit knowledge indicates abstract concepts and a scheme of interrelated concepts that may be transferred across situations (Yang, 2003; Yang, Zheng and Viere, 2009).

For the operators of e-commerce companies, the knowledge here is demonstrated in two different ways, one is implicit knowledge, which is based on the operators' experience in the working environment (Chen, Chang and Hsu, 2017). Usually, this kind of knowledge is the perception of the industry's acumen accumulated, the proficiency in using operation tools, and the skills in e-commerce operation tasks, obtained through long-term work. The other one is explicit knowledge, which is usually the new product used for business analysis and sales promotion provided by the platform system (Moorman, 1995). This kind of knowledge is usually updated every six months or so, which has a great impact on the online sales of e-commerce companies, and with time, the impact is weakened, just like the IT product life cycle.

Jha and Varkkey (2018) identified factors that triggered knowledge-hiding behavior among R&D employees including distrust, competitive work environment, perceived career insecurity, lack of recognition, lack of reciprocation and lack of confidence in one's knowledge. Serenko and Bontis (2016) found that job insecurity motivates knowledge hiding and employees may reciprocate negative knowledge behavior under compensation concern. Based on recent findings about the antecedents of knowledge hiding (Singh, 2019; Serenko and Bontis, 2016), and the typology of knowledge (Yang, Zhen and Viere, 2009), we proposed two paths that may explain knowledge hiding phenomenon in the e-commerce industry: the implicit knowledge may be held mainly within the pattern of job insecurity while the explicit knowledge may be hidden mainly within the pattern of timeliness (Chatterjee et al., 2021). Figure 1 depicts the proposed model.

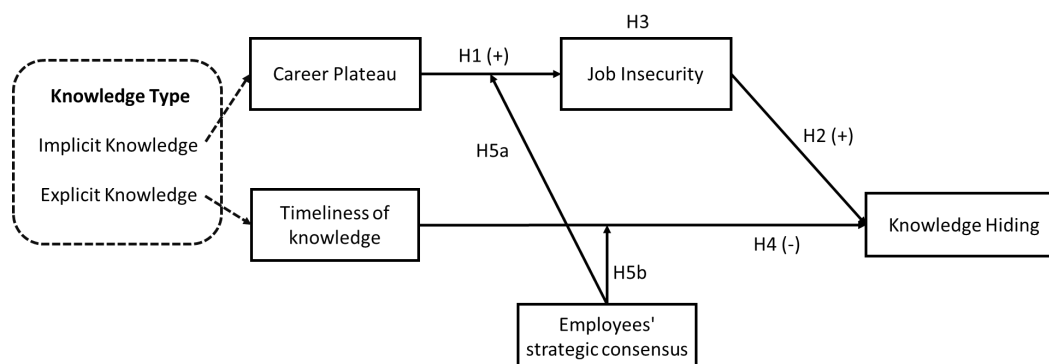


Figure 1: Proposed model

### **2.1 Career plateau, job insecurity and hiding implicit knowledge**

Experienced staff usually picture their career blueprint clearly and are sensitive to their potential job opportunities and career plateau because of their accumulated working experience. Career plateau is regarded as the identification of objective facets, such as age and job tenure, by scholars in the very early studies (Chao, 1990). Then, the description and definition of career plateau were reshaped by Chao (1990) as a person believes that his or her future promotion is limited, regardless of objective criteria. It implies that a subjective definition of career plateau is more acceptable in academic studies (Chao, 1990; Niven and Johnson, 2019). Besides, a large proportion of empirical research has found a general link between career plateau and employee's poor well-being and performance (Yang, Niven and Johnson, 2019).

Job insecurity is described as the perceived likelihood of involuntarily losing one's current job (Darvishmotevali, Arasli and Kilic, 2017; Shoss, 2017). The majority of the literature shows that job (in)security is an important predictor of employee wellbeing and work-related attitudes (Yang, Liu et al., 2014a; Shoss, 2017). Job insecurity is a negative situation that triggers unwanted outputs in employees. Research revealed that job insecurity has led to a decrease in job satisfaction (Reisel et al., 2007) and organizational commitment (Frone, 2018), an increase in stress levels (Probst and Jiang, 2017; Xue et al., 2022) and a decrease in employee performance (Frone, 2018).

Knowledge hiding is a typical inappropriate behavior in the workplace, which will undermine employees' work performance. Connelly et al. (2012) defined knowledge hiding as an attempt by an individual to deliberately hide the knowledge requested by another person and proved that knowledge hiding consists of three independent but related factors—rationalized hiding (i.e., the concealer provides a reason for failing to provide the requested knowledge by implying that he or she cannot provide the requested knowledge or accusing the other party), playing dumb (i.e., the concealer pretends to know nothing about the relevant knowledge) and evasive hiding (i.e., even if you do not intend to provide the information, the concealer will provide incorrect information or a misleading promise that will give a complete answer in the future).

It has been said that the most important resource for organizations today is qualified employees because they are playing a vital role in adapting organizations to the constantly updated business environment and solving the problems they face. Nonetheless, the organization may eliminate some employees they think are unqualified during the crisis, or if there are multiple people in the same position, the organization may dismiss the excess and only leave one or two. Many employees will start worrying about unemployment and feel a strong sense of insecurity. Based on the COR theory, employees tend to hold their accumulated experience to keep the advantage in work to increase their feelings of security and well-being. So, employees who continue to work in insecure situations are unlikely to share implicit knowledge with others. Thus, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: Employees with a stronger perception of career plateau have experienced greater job insecurity.

Hypothesis 2: Employees who perceived stronger job insecurity are more likely to hide knowledge.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' job insecurity mediates their perception of career plateau and knowledge hiding.

### **2.2 Timeliness and hiding explicit knowledge**

As illustrated earlier, explicit knowledge in the e-commerce industry can also be viewed as one form of innovation in which knowledge content can represent its innovative characteristics. Scholars indicated that perceived innovation characteristics of knowledge are derived from individuals' evaluation, which in turn leads to their decision to adopt or reject innovation (Venkatesh, Morris and Davis, 2003). The characteristics of this knowledge are very prominent in the e-commerce platform. The competition in the e-commerce industry is very fierce, which leads to frequent platform technology updates to maintain and enhance the platform's competitive advantage in the market (Pandey, et al., 2021). Vakulenko et al., (2019) have indicated that every time it goes through a cycle (usually about half a year), the e-commerce platform will launch a new operation tool to help e-commerce enterprise operators quickly analyze data, optimize store operation management solutions and improve sales performance. The new products of technological innovation launched by this platform are new knowledge for online store operators. The sooner you master this knowledge, the greater advantage you can gain in the market (Pandey, et al., 2021).

Harviainen, Lehtonen and Kock (2022) found that time is strongly tied to the people's information-sharing behavior in the tightly knit Finnish game development industry, which brings forth new insights on how timeliness influences knowledge sharing within creative industries. They asserted that by sharing high time-sensitive knowledge, employees could help the company seek a more decisive advantage in the market and be able to acquire an advantage themselves. On the other hand, employees may tend to hide knowledge with low timeliness, which can equip them better in inner-company competition. Thus, we propose that:

Hypothesis 4: For knowledge with a higher level of timeliness, employees are less likely to hide.

### **2.3 The moderation effect of employees' strategic consensus**

Employees' strategic consensus can be broken down into three aspects: strategic understanding, strategic recognition and strategic commitment. Strategic understanding means that employees at all levels have a common understanding and accurate knowledge of the company's vision, mission, and strategic goals and means of realization (Rapert, Velliquette and Garretson, 2002; Ateş, 2020). Strategic identity represents employees' general recognition of the company's strategic goals and means of realization. Strategic commitment indicates the process of corporate strategy execution. During the process, employees at all levels have a positive attitude and cooperate to achieve the sharing of resources and capabilities.

Ateş (2020) indicated that whether employees understand and keep to the company's strategy depends on whether they believe the company's strategy. If employees do not have a consensus with the company's strategy, they will be unwilling to follow their leaders and execute the task from the perspective of the company's benefit (Rapert, Velliquette and Garretson, 2002). In that case, the execution quality of the company's strategy will be deplorable, and various problems may appear at work. Take the e-commerce industry as an example. Employees' knowledge hiding behavior is still universal because of their primary concerns about promotion, competition and crisis at the workplace (Harviainen, Lehtonen and Kock, 2022). Managers long for employees who take the initiative to stop hiding knowledge. Thus, updating the rules from a strategic perspective to dispel employees' concerns and attenuate employees' tendency of knowledge hiding behavior seems possible. In addition, the newly innovated products launched by the e-commerce platform are typically explicit knowledge for online store employees, which is strongly tied to timeliness. In other words, the faster employees obtain the knowledge, the more prominent advantage both the employees and the company can gain. In this scenario, the timelier the knowledge is, the less willing the employees to hide the explicit knowledge. If the employees' consensus on the company's strategy is higher, their unwillingness to hide knowledge is stronger. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 5a: Employees' strategic consensus moderate the positive relationship between employees' career plateau and their job insecurity, in that, the association is stronger when employees' strategic consensus is lower, while weaker when employees' strategic consensus is higher.

Hypothesis 5b: Employees' strategic consensus moderate the negative relationship between the timeliness of knowledge and employees' knowledge hiding behavior, in that, the association is stronger when employees' strategic consensus is higher, while weaker employees' strategic consensus is lower.

## **3. Methodology**

We collected data from employees from six e-commerce companies (namely Suzhou Beijiajia Electronic Commerce Co., Ltd; Suzhou Jinjin Food Co., Ltd; Suzhou New Departure Advertising Media Co., Ltd; Suzhou Jimei Daily Chemical Co., Ltd; Suzhou YiXiangJi Co., Ltd and Suzhou Shiang Network Technology Co., Ltd). These institutions are all located in Suzhou city, Jiangsu province, which is reported to be the leading e-commerce industry in China. Following the back-translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1980), we created a Chinese version of all measures. Each company's human resource manager provided a list of randomly selected participants. We showed each participant a QR code to scan, which leads to a cover letter outlining the details of the survey and a questionnaire. We also provided each participant with a small gift to increase the response rate. To reduce the possible biases such as consistency motifs and illusory correlation, this survey adopted a two-wave design with a four-week lag (Peng, 2013). All the participants are frontline employees and junior managers. During the first stage (T1), participants completed measures of the predictor variable (career plateau and timeliness of knowledge), moderating variables (employees' strategy consensus), individual demographics (employee gender, age, education and organizational tenure), firm characteristics (company age, size and ownership style). During the second stage (T2), participants rated mediator (job insecurity) and dependent

variable (knowledge hiding). Specifically, we sent questionnaires to 450 participants at T1 first. About four weeks later (T2), the questionnaire on knowledge hiding was completed by those who finished the first-stage survey. Finally, we got 433 questionnaires in the first wave and 382 questionnaires in the second wave, among which 375 people have taken part in both stages of the survey with a response rate of around 79%. During our review, we studied gender, age, education and tenure but did not identify any significant differences between those who had responded and those who had not.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Reliability and validity**

The measurement items for testing the research model were developed by modifying existing validated scales to fit the context of each construct of this research. All items of the measurement were evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. We utilize SPSS as the quantitative analytic technique to predict the initial development of a theory or research model and AMOS for confirmation analysis. The analytic results showed solid individual item reliability, internal consistency and validity.

The study tested the reliability of each item (via factor loading) and the internal reliability (via Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability (CR). The smallest value of Cronbach's Alpha of the research was 0.812, indicating a favorable level of reliability (Nunnally, 1978). Besides, since the smallest CR value of all variables is 0.814 (>0.700) which achieves an acceptable level of internal consistency (Chin et al., 2003). For the convergent validity, all the values of the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct were acceptable as they exceeded 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), ranging from 0.522 to 0.811. Table 1 shows the relevant values of the measurement model.

As to the discriminant validity of the measurement model, the correlations of the construct with other constructs in this study were lower than the value of the square root of the AVE of each construct, indicating an acceptable level of discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As shown in Table 1, the hypothesized five-factor structure fitted the data well:  $\chi^2=384.162$ ,  $df= 142$ , root mean square error approximation (RMSEA)= 0.065, comparative fit index (CFI)=0.966, Tucker–Lewis's index (TLI)=0.959, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)=0.047. Therefore, the results presented satisfactory reliability, validity and model fit at the measurement model.

**Table 1:** Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results

Factor	Items	Factor loading (t-value) ***	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	Sources
Timeliness of knowledge (TI)	TI1	0.742(25.868) ***	0.954	0.921	0.797	Moorman (1995)
	TI2	0.929(23.244) ***				
	TI3	0.988(12.630) ***				
Career Plateau (CP)	CP1	0.865(20.633) ***	0.914	0.919	0.791	Allen et al. (1999)
	CP2	0.984(25.551) ***				
	CP3	0.811(18.755) ***				
Job Insecurity (JI)	JI1	0.833(19.869) ***	0.913	0.957	0.881	Elsamen and Alshurideh (2012)
	JI2	0.984(26.372) ***				
	JI3	0.991(26.733) ***				
Employee Strategy consensus (ES)	ES1	0.692(13.840) ***	0.812	0.814	0.522	Rapert, Velliquette and Garretson (2002)
	ES2	0.732(14.847) ***				
	ES3	0.760(15.557) ***				
	ES4	0.704(14.144) ***				
Knowledge Hiding (KH)	KH1	0.875(21.438) ***	0.965	0.965	0.821	Connelly et al. (2012)
	KH2	0.977(26.06) ***				
	KH3	0.970(25.728) ***				
	KH4	0.933(23.933) ***				
	KH5	0.853(23.149) ***				
	KH6	0.818(19.290) ***				
<i>Goodness-of-fit indexes</i>						
$\chi^2$ (142f) = 384.162 (p = .000)	RMSEA	CFI	SRMR	TLI		
	0.065	0.966	0.047	0.959		

Note: \*\* p ≤ 0.001. N=375

**Table 2:** Means (M), standard deviations and correlation among variables

Variable	M	SD	TI	CP	JI	EC	KH
Timeliness of knowledge (TI)	5.250	1.318	0.892 <sup>a</sup>				
Career Plateau (CP)	3.782	1.683	0.037	0.889 <sup>a</sup>			
Job Insecurity (JI)	3.483	1.671	0.087	0.518***	0.938 <sup>a</sup>		
Employee Strategy Consensus (ES)	4.774	1.299	-0.248***	0.005	-0.028	0.722 <sup>a</sup>	
Knowledge Hiding (KH)	2.853	1.536	-0.184**	0.276***	0.273***	-0.001	0.906 <sup>a</sup>

Note: <sup>a</sup> Numbers on the diagonal represent the square roots of AVE for each factor; \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001 N=375

**4.2 Tests of structural relationships and hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1, 2, 3 and 5a were tested in model 1 with PROCESS macro 3.3 proposed by Hayes (2019). Analyses were conducted through bootstrapping (5,000 bootstrap samples) to test the moderated mediation model. The results indicated that positive relationships existed between employee career plateau and job insecurity ( $\beta=0.352, p<0.001$ ), employee job insecurity and employee knowledge hiding ( $\beta=0.134, p=0.015$ ), employee career plateau and knowledge hiding ( $\beta=0.175, p<0.001$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and 2 are supported. The interaction term career plateau x employee strategy consensus is significantly related to knowledge hiding ( $\beta=-0.173, p<0.001$ ), indicating that the effect of employee career plateau on employee job insecurity is stronger when the employee strategy consensus is low than when it is high (see Figure 2). Thus, Hypothesis 5a was supported (as shown in Table 3). Hypothesis 3 postulated a mediating effect of job insecurity on the relationship between employee career plateau and knowledge hiding. The results of the bootstrapping approach confirmed the significant indirect effect of employee career plateau on knowledge hiding through job insecurity ( $\Theta=-0.023, [-0.047, -0.002]$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3. This analysis also revealed that the index of moderated mediation for



**Table 4:** Bootstrap results

Path	Moderator	Level	Indirect effect	95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI
CP→JI→KH	ES	Low	0.087	[0.009, 0.169]
		Mid	0.035	[0.034, 0.077]
		High	0.014	[-0.002, 0.053]

Additionally, we also tested the effects of the control variables (see Table 3). The results demonstrated that company scale and employee’s age might negatively influence employee’s job insecurity and knowledge hiding; employee’s education level and tenure might positively affect employee’s job insecurity and knowledge hiding.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to the literature on knowledge hiding research in three ways. First, based on the type of knowledge in the e-commerce workplace, this study detects the perspectives of insecurity feeling towards the job and the time facet of knowledge, which is quite different from previous pieces (Singh, 2019). With investigations, we manifested the knowledge involved in the e-commerce environment mainly as explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge, corresponding to the definition and classification of knowledge (Yang, 2003; Yang, Niven and Johnson, 2019; Chen, Chang and Hsu, 2017). Second, we found that the tacit (or implicit) knowledge in the e-commerce environment will be hidden because the employees are afraid of losing their jobs (advantages) and have a sense of crisis (e.g., being replaced) in the current work. This result also speaks for Darvishmotevali, Arasli and Kilic’s (2017) opinion that the feeling of job insecurity will lead to employees’ shrewd behavior. Besides, our findings indicate that explicit knowledge with a high level of timeliness is less likely to be hidden because of its benefit for both company and individuals. The result echoes the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and also reflects the technical nature of explicit knowledge in an e-commerce environment (Vakulenko et al., 2019). Third, this paper draws employees’ strategy consensus to associate the relationship between knowledge hiding behavior and its antecedents. According to the results, when employees’ strategy consensus is strong (weak), the career plateau has a less (more) effect on employees’ job insecurity and less (more) effect on employees’ knowledge hiding behavior; while, the timeliness of knowledge has more (less) effect on employees’ knowledge hiding behavior. The results are consistent with the views of previous scholars that although the company has formulated policies to stimulate employee's performance and OCB (Liu et al., 2016), employees' strategy consensus affects the implementation of the policy (Desmidt and George, 2016). The role of employees’ strategy consensus is overlooked by previous research on knowledge hiding. However, it is important and has been attempt by many supervisors in e-commerce firms. They create a vision to guide the change through inspiration and develop incentive policies to encourage knowledge sharing.

### 5.2 Practical implications

The investigation of the present research appears to tell us that organizational interventions attenuate knowledge hiding behavior in e-commerce firms, while the survey results released some hints of practice. First, firms should pay more attention to collecting the critical knowledge that employees have to equip. Managers can take different measures regarding both types of knowledge so that the knowledge will be exposed from hidden places (Jha and Varkkey, 2018). For example, for explicit knowledge, managers can foster cutting-edge knowledge and technologies for employees by sending them to e-commerce training institutions and business forums regularly, rather than relying solely on internal knowledge sharing. For tacit (implicit) knowledge, as its hardness in expression, it is necessary to arrange brainstorming communication and expressive training for employees to display and share their internal experiences smoothly (Yang, 2003; Yang, Niven and Johnson, 2019; Chen, Chang and Hsu, 2017). Second, since employees’ sense of insecurity towards job will lead to hiding tacit knowledge behaviors, managers ought to understand the sources of the psychological phenomenon and eliminate them through job promotion and monetary incentive strategies (Liu et al., 2014b; Liu et al., 2020). Third, since employees' nonconsensus with strategy or management will make them more inclined to hide knowledge when formulating and implementing policies, the company must give full consideration to the employees' awareness and make timely explanations and adjustments. Forth, since employees will be more inclined to hide their knowledge if their cognition with strategy or management is not consensus, the firms should give full consideration to employees’ perception, feeling and willingness when formulating and implementing policies.

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