

Employee Withdrawal and its Potential Link With Knowledge Risks

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Abstract: This conceptual paper aims to identify and present the potential impact of employee withdrawal on knowledge risks in organizations. Employee withdrawal is a subtype of counterproductive work behaviour and a critical issue for organisations. Employees who are no longer committed to their organizations may engage in various types of withdrawal behaviours. Employee withdrawal may begin with small actions like being late, or daydreaming, but they might culminate in more serious and significant behaviours like absenteeism, missing meetings, or quitting that can be detrimental to the organization. Since a large proportion of organizational knowledge is personalized and resides in individuals' heads researching employee withdrawal behaviours is particularly critical in the context of knowledge risks. Employee withdrawal in the context of knowledge management has begun to be examined only recently. To the best knowledge of the authors, there are no publications that describe the link between employee withdrawal behaviours and various knowledge risks. To fill this gap, the authors of this paper have analysed the literature both on withdrawal behaviours and knowledge risks and created a matrix that illustrates the potential impact of different employee withdrawal behaviours on various knowledge risks in an organization. This study is based on the analysis of the literature related to employee withdrawal and knowledge risks. The paper lays the ground for a better understanding of knowledge risks and their relation with employee withdrawal, and provides food for thought for managers and owners on how the withdrawal behaviours of their employees might potentially generate various knowledge risks in their workplace.

Keywords: Employee withdrawal, Knowledge risks, Knowledge management

1. Introduction

Retaining experienced and committed employees remains a constant challenge for organisations in a competitive global environment. Unattached to organisations and institutions, employees born between 1980 and 1996 - move freely from company to company, more than any other generation (Adkins, 2023). Therefore, organisations should pay special attention to organisational commitment - the employee's willingness to remain a member of the organisation (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013). Organisational commitment influences whether an employee remains a member of the organisation (retention) or leaves in search of another job (turnover). However, the matter is not always clear and obvious; an employee who is no longer committed may refrain from choosing one of these options and instead manifest an intermediate approach, which is withdrawal. Specifically, withdrawal refers to a set of attitudes and behaviours used by employees when they stay at the job but for some reasons decide to be less participative in their duty engagement (Kaplan *et al.*, 2009). Those attitudes and behaviours might take either psychological or physical forms.

The withdrawal of employees can be particularly dangerous due to its contagious character. Withdrawing employees, whose morale and motivation to work decrease can also demotivate others, which in turn can cause serious damage to the organisation and hinder its long-term development (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Employee withdrawal behaviours are recognized as negative behaviours from the organizational point of view, mostly due to the costs or disruptions they cause (Johns, 2002). Additionally, they can also result in several knowledge-related risks. Knowledge risks are a term used to describe a measure of the likelihood and severity of the negative impact of any knowledge-related activity that may negatively affect the functioning of an organisation (Durst and Zięba, 2019).

Despite the high importance of employee commitment for the success of effective knowledge management in organisations (Stankiewicz and Moczulska, 2015), little is known about how employee withdrawal might influence human and organizational knowledge risks. Therefore, it is fundamental to investigate how psychological and physical employee withdrawal behaviours are associated with human and operational knowledge risks. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper aims to present the potential link between employee withdrawal and various knowledge risks.

The paper develops in the following way. The second part presents the concept of employee withdrawal. In the third section, knowledge risks are described. In the fourth section, the potential impact of psychological and physical withdrawal behaviours on various knowledge risks is presented. The last section concludes the paper.

2. Employee Withdrawal

Arriving late and leaving early for no reason, being negative about the content of work, and thinking about leaving work - these negative ways of dealing with obstacles at work can be examples of withdrawal behaviours (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). This refers to the intentional behaviour of an employee in an attempt to avoid work, including physically withdrawing from the workplace or psychologically disengaging from work (Hanisch and Hulin, 1990). Employee withdrawal refers to a range of negative behaviours that distance the employee from the organisation and weaken ties (Liao *et al.*, 2022). Employee withdrawal from an organization can take many behavioural forms, including turnover, absenteeism, and lateness. It may also be of psychological character, i.e., loss of job involvement (Beehr and Gupta, 1978). According to Allen, Bryant and Vardaman (2010), the employee withdrawal process typically involves thoughts of quitting, job search, evaluation and comparison of alternative opportunities, turnover intentions, and this all can eventually lead to turnover behaviour. It can have severe consequences for organisations owing to replacement costs, loss of knowledge, and lowered morale in the workforce (Allen *et al.*, 2010).

The most common taxonomy of employee withdrawal behaviours divides them into two main categories: physical withdrawal behaviours and psychological withdrawal behaviours (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013). In Table 1 there are presented some forms of withdrawal behaviours identified in the literature, together with their definitions.

Table 1: Definitions of selected forms of employee withdrawal behaviours

Physical withdrawal behaviours	
Tardiness	"The act of failing to report for duty or return to duty at the scheduled time." (Sliter, Sliter & Jex, 2012)
Long breaks	"Involve longer-than-normal lunches, soda breaks, coffee breaks, and so forth that provide a physical escape from work." (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013)
Absenteeism	"Occurs when employees miss an entire day of work." (Muchinsky, 1977)
Psychological withdrawal behaviours	
Daydreaming	"When employees appear to be working but are distracted by random thoughts or concerns." (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013)
Cyberloafing	"Any voluntary act of employees' using their companies' internet access during office hours to surf non-job related Web sites for personal purposes and to check (including receiving and sending) personal e-mail." (Lim, 2002)
Moonlighting	"They use work time and resources to complete something other than their job duties, such as assignments for another job." (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013)
Employee silence	"Deliberate intention to withhold ideas, information, opinions, or questions about the job or organizational possible issues and improvements." (Dyne, Ang and Botero, 2003)
Turnover intention	"Voluntary, conscious and intentional wilfulness to leave the present employer" (Tett and Meyer, 1993).

Source: Own compilation, based on the sources provided in the table.

The above-described behaviours may be uncorrelated with one another, employees who distance themselves mentally – may not need to distance themselves physically by being absent. However, the behaviours may also be positively correlated, meaning the tendency to daydream leads to the tendency to come in late or take long breaks, which leads to the tendency to be absent or quit (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013). The classic progression-of-withdrawal model specifies sequential causal links from lateness to absence to turnover (Rosse, 1988). According to Colquitt and Lepine (2013), withdrawal behaviours may begin with tiny and insignificant actions but can culminate in more significant behaviours that can be harmful to the organisations. Usually, studies on employee withdrawal characterise this phenomenon as negative and counter-productive because of the costs or disruption (Johns, 2002) and also the spreading character of this phenomenon. When some employees withdraw from their duties (either mentally or physically), it sends negative psychological signals to others, consequently, the morale and motivation of other employees also decrease (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Since

every knowledge management activity requires the involvement of employees, their focus, and motivation (Stankiewicz and Moczulska, 2015), it is probable that employee withdrawal behaviours may harm knowledge processes and thus, also affect knowledge risks.

3. Knowledge Risks

The concept of knowledge risk has emerged through the integration of two areas, i.e. risk management, and knowledge management. Knowledge risks encompass a broad range of threats associated with knowledge that an organization may encounter. Knowledge risk might be defined as “a measure of the probability and severity of adverse effects of any activities engaging or related somehow to knowledge that can affect the functioning of an organization on any level” (Durst and Zieba, 2019).

Human knowledge risks are connected with an individual’s personal, social, cultural, psychological factors and thus human resources management. For example, the risks of knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, unlearning, or forgetting are related to this category of knowledge risks (Durst and Zieba, 2019). Technological knowledge risks are related to the application of various technologies in organizations, hacker attacks and social media-related threats fall under this category. These risks are also relevant to knowledge management. Finally, there are operational knowledge risks - the largest category of the three. Those risks encompass the ones resulting from the day-to-day operation of the company, such as the risk of using wrong or obsolete knowledge, knowledge transfer risks, knowledge waste, and others (Durst and Zieba, 2019). In Table 2, particular types of knowledge risks are presented, together with their definitions. The table shows the risks selected by the authors from two categories – human and operational, ones. The rationale for this choice is that these types of risks are most likely to be influenced by withdrawal behaviours, as they are related to employees and their behaviours. Therefore, the following section describes the potential impact of employee withdrawal behaviours on these types of risks.

Table 2: Definitions of selected types of knowledge risks

Human knowledge risks	
Knowledge hiding	An intentional attempt to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person. (Connelly et al., 2012, p.65)
Knowledge hoarding	The act of accumulating knowledge that may or may not be shared at a later date (Connelly et al., 2012) and this knowledge has not been asked for by another individual (Webster et al., 2008).
Operational knowledge risks	
Risk of using obsolete/unreliable knowledge	Risks occur when out-of-date knowledge is applied in the organizational context/inter-organizational settings or when a company applies unreliable knowledge, for example, received from a malicious source. (Zieba and Durst, 2019)
Risk of improper application of knowledge	Risks that occur when a company does not have the right skills and abilities to analyse and apply knowledge properly (Zieba & Durst, 2019).
Continuity risks	Risks relate to an organization’s ability to maintain its core capabilities over time and to its ability to continue to perform and compete at consistent levels as people come and go (Lambe, 2013).
Knowledge transfer risks	Risks related to all the potential interruptions in the process of transferring knowledge, e.g., lacking willingness to share knowledge, knowledge stickiness, etc. (Durst and Zieba, 2017).
Communication risks	Risks that appear in the process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour, such as misinterpretation, broken communication flow, etc. (Zieba et al., 2021)

Source: (Zieba *et al.*, 2021)

As it can be seen in the table above, organisations may face a variety of knowledge-related risks that can influence their operational continuity, innovation potential, and decision-making process. Among these, knowledge hiding and knowledge hoarding are particularly threatening for collaboration and organizational learning, as they destroy trust and reduce overall knowledge accessibility (Connelly et al., 2012; Serenko &

Bontis, 2016). Operational knowledge risks appear when key procedural knowledge is undocumented or fragmented, leading to inefficiencies and problems during transitions or disruptions (Durst & Zieba, 2019). The use of obsolete or unreliable knowledge is also threatening, as decisions based on outdated or incorrect knowledge can result in strategic mistakes or operational failure (Dalkir, 2017). Similarly, the improper application of knowledge that results from poor understanding or lack of appropriate training can cause errors, especially in complex environments (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Continuity risks, including the loss of institutional memory through employee turnover, challenge long-term sustainability and require robust knowledge retention strategies (Levallet & Chan, 2019). Additionally, knowledge transfer risks and communication risks, such as unclear messages or silos mentality, make the dissemination of critical insights across teams and departments more complicated (Raub & Wittich, 2004). Addressing these interrelated risks requires an appropriate knowledge management approach that supports openness, ensures knowledge quality, and integrates knowledge sharing into daily operations. It is necessary to handle these risks in organisations and to be able to identify the factors that can cause them or increase their intensity. That is why, the potential link between those knowledge risks and employee withdrawal will be examined in the following section.

4. Employee Withdrawal and Knowledge Risks

Taking into account the characteristics of various employee withdrawal behaviours and knowledge risks, one can expect a link between these concepts for several reasons. All knowledge activities require the involvement of employees, their focus on work, organization, and environment, and the effectiveness of knowledge activity depends on employees' behaviours and their skills (Stankiewicz and Moczulska, 2015). Moreover, an engaged workforce constitutes a competitive advantage and brings additional value to the organization (Kont, 2022). Employees who are withdrawing can potentially influence negatively individuals, job performance, innovativeness, and whole businesses, including posing knowledge-related risks.

Human knowledge risks, especially in the form of knowledge hiding or knowledge hoarding can appear when an employee is angry (Zieba, 2023) or discontent and frustrated (Leonard, 2014). These emotions can contribute to an employee's withdrawal (in any form) from the organisation. Therefore, it is likely that an employee who for example psychologically withdraws from work may intentionally conceal the knowledge after someone has already asked for it (Connelly *et al.*, 2012), or hoard their knowledge. Physical withdrawal (e.g., absenteeism, tardiness, long breaks) will not directly impact knowledge hiding, or hoarding based on the nature of these behaviours, but the effect will be the same (knowledge will not be shared/revealed). However, when an employee voluntarily leaves an organisation and psychologically distances himself or herself, he or she may hide and hoard knowledge for weeks or months before their actual physical leave. It may manifest itself for example through behaviours like reluctance to collaborate, or withholding ideas, and information (employee silence). Employees who are distracted during work (daydreaming) will probably not pay attention to organisational issues, and they may pretend during meetings or workshops that they are unaware of knowledge, in other words, they may play dumb and manifest ignorance to avoid sharing information. Therefore, psychological withdrawal will probably have a potentially high impact on both knowledge hiding and hoarding.

Operational knowledge risks can be a result of various employee withdrawal behaviours. First of all, physical withdrawal of an employee - not being present during important meetings, coming to work late or leaving early, may increase the risk of using obsolete/unreliable knowledge by this employee and also his or her colleagues (e.g. in case when this employee possesses some new or reliable knowledge not shared with their peers). Knowledge may quickly become obsolete or irrelevant (Tan *et al.*, 2006) and therefore, if employees miss a meeting or entire day or days of work, there is a risk that they will apply outdated knowledge in their daily operations once back at work. Secondly, also some forms of psychological withdrawal like daydreaming (i.e. "when employees appear to be working but are distracted by random thoughts or concerns" (Colquitt, Lepine and Wesson, 2013) may potentially lead to people not paying attention, and not listen to some important messages. The consequence can be using obsolete or unreliable knowledge. The next risk - improperly applying knowledge can be also impacted by employee psychological withdrawal. When an employee is cyberloafing, daydreaming or using work time or resources to complete something other than their job duties (moonlighting) he or she remains deconcentrated, and he or she can apply knowledge improperly. Physical withdrawal will not directly jeopardise the misapplication of knowledge, as the absent employee, whether for a short or long period during the absence, is not performing any knowledge-related duties.

Knowledge transfer risks are related to all the potential interruptions in the process of transferring knowledge (Durst and Zieba, 2017). Knowledge transfer is a people-to-people process (Tangaraja *et al.*, 2016), therefore, one can expect a direct negative impact of employee withdrawal on knowledge transfer. Frequent absenteeism,

tardiness, and missing meetings mean less opportunity for knowledge transfer, which may for example cause delays in projects where knowledge transfer is crucial. Considering the psychological withdrawal of an employee, it seems that its impact on knowledge transfer may be less severe than in the case of physical withdrawal. Knowledge transfer involves formalised training programmes, which the psychological withdrawer may not be able to opt out of. However, the quality of the training may be inferior, causing fragmentation and potential loss of critical organisational knowledge. In the context of learning and knowledge management, communication is critical, as it is needed to make knowledge practices possible (Durst and Zieba, 2019). If an employee is physically withdrawing from work, there is no communication. However, once an employee is psychologically withdrawing (like in the case of cyberloafing or daydreaming), it impacts the communication process between a knowledge provider and knowledge recipient. Moreover, employee silence (i.e. withholding ideas, information, opinions, or questions (Dyne et al., 2003) makes the information exchange process even more difficult - it may result in misinterpretation or even broken communication flow. Disrupted communication can directly increase the risk of knowledge waste, and threaten knowledge continuity. This risk concerns the ability of the organization to continue its operations, stay competitive and maintain core capabilities (Lambe, 2013). Withdrawal of employees may hinder organisational continuity, since tacit knowledge is kept in people's heads and comes from their experience. Therefore, as long as people psychologically or physically distance themselves from the organization, core knowledge (to a greater or lesser extent depending on the type of withdrawal) can be lost and as a result, threaten organisational ability to continue its performance. These potential relations between selected knowledge risks and employee withdrawal behaviours are depicted in the table below.

Table 3: The possible impact of employee withdrawal on various human and organisational knowledge risks

	Knowledge hiding & hoarding	Risk of using obsolete/unreliable knowledge	Improper applying knowledge	Knowledge transfer	Communication risk	Continuity risks
Physical withdrawal	No impact	Potential high impact	No impact	Potential high impact	No impact	Potential high impact
Psychological withdrawal	Potential high impact	Potential impact	Potential impact	Potential impact	Potential impact	Potential high impact

Source: Own elaboration

5. Discussion

This paper contributes to the literature on knowledge risk management, which is an emerging field of research. Identifying employee withdrawal as a key risk factor might be used once developing further taxonomies and frameworks of knowledge risks. Moreover, the paper adds to the existing literature on employee withdrawal as it sheds light on its possible negative consequences from a knowledge management perspective, which is novel. Previous studies mainly identified costs and disruption as consequences of employee withdrawal. Finally, this study contributes to the research on the involvement of employees in knowledge management processes. Researchers could use this paper to build upon existing engagement theories and develop new models that explain the intricate relationships between employee withdrawal and knowledge management.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, the impact of various types of withdrawal behaviours on knowledge risks can be diversified. It can be noticed that psychological withdrawal is potentially more severe in implications, as it can be done by an employee even if he or she is at work and is expected to conduct their duties. This kind of withdrawal is more challenging to be noticed by other peers or supervisors and at the same time, it potentially impacts all the selected types of knowledge risks. In a sense, physical withdrawal is easier to manage, as there are no expectations from an employee who is not present at work or a meeting, while it would be natural to expect a present employee to perform at their best. An employee who is psychologically withdrawing can intentionally generate more knowledge risks related to organisational functioning (e.g. by knowledge hiding or hoarding or lack of knowledge transfer).

The article contributes to the existing state of knowledge in both management and psychology. On the one hand, it presents knowledge risk and the phenomenon of employee withdrawal, and on the other hand, it identifies the potential link between these two concepts - the potential impact of physical and psychological withdrawal behaviours on various knowledge risks. It presents how interdisciplinary the work of managers or leaders has become – they need to focus on employees and their behaviours, as their withdrawal not only causes financial

losses to the company, reduces their productivity, but also harms knowledge-related processes, which in turn can lead to various human and operational knowledge risks.

The main limitation of this study is that it is theoretical in nature. By combining knowledge from psychology and management, it has been possible to outline some potential relationships between employee withdrawal behaviours and various knowledge risks. This relationship needs to be further explored both from a theoretical and practical perspective. Employee withdrawal is still an under-researched theme in the context of knowledge management. It is necessary to examine in empirical studies the relation between knowledge risks and employee withdrawal behaviours with the use of qualitative research methods.

All in all, the paper has established the basis for a better understanding of the potential impact of employee withdrawal on knowledge risks that organizations may face nowadays. As such, the paper offers food for thought for researchers dealing with the topic of knowledge risks, employee withdrawal, and knowledge management in general.

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