

Understanding the Role of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge Hiding in Organizations

Darren Wiggins and Ling Wang

College of Computing and Engineering, Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, USA

dlwiggins@gmail.com

lingwang@nova.edu

Abstract: Knowledge hiding (KHi) is the intentional withholding of knowledge from colleagues, often caused by a lack of trust. It takes three forms: rationalized hiding, evasive hiding, and playing dumb, with the latter two fueling ongoing mistrust. To address this, organizations promote sharing both Tacit Knowledge (TK) and Explicit Knowledge (EK), to improve teamwork, problem-solving, and workplace relationships. Recent studies highlight the challenge of distinguishing general knowledge from TK and the difficulty of articulating TK, which adds to its scarcity and value. Examining the intentions and motivations behind KHi and KHo, often driven by fear, provides important insights into organizational knowledge dynamics. This study aimed to identify key factors influencing individuals' decisions to share TK or engage in KHi or KHo behaviors in the workplace. Using an 11-stage Survey Design methodology, data was collected from 285 Knowledge Management (KM) professionals across five countries over 42 days. This comprehensive approach ensured a diverse and representative sample, enhancing the validity and applicability of the findings. Results revealed that participants were aware of and engaged in KHi, KHo, and Knowledge Sharing (KS) behaviors. They recognized that TK holders made deliberate sharing decisions based on trust, sincerity, skillsets, and expertise. This insight underscores the complexity of KM in organizational settings and the need for nuanced approaches to encourage KS. The study highlighted the need for future research to include leadership influences, which significantly impact KHi and KHo behaviors. This finding emphasizes the critical role of leadership in shaping knowledge-sharing cultures within organizations and suggests that effective KM strategies must consider leadership styles and practices. By addressing these complex issues, organizations can develop more effective strategies to promote KS, reduce harmful hiding behaviors, and ultimately enhance their competitive advantage through improved KM practices. The study's findings provide a foundation for future research and practical applications in organizational KM, potentially leading to more efficient and collaborative work environments.

Keywords: Knowledge hiding, Knowledge hoarding, Knowledge sharing, Tacit knowledge, Behavioral intention, Trust

1. Introduction

Knowledge Hiding (KHi) involves intentionally withholding information due to organizational factors like politics, behavior, or workplace treatment. Connelly et al. (2012) define it as deliberate concealment driven by distrust, expressed through rationalized hiding, evasive hiding, or playing dumb.

Rationalized hiding, KHi's least harmful form, withholds information citing sensitivity/confidentiality, breeding distrust (Bari et al., 2020; Connelly et al., 2012; Tian et al., 2021). Evasive hiding shares partial/misleading information (Tian et al., 2021), while playing dumb feigns ignorance (Bari et al., 2020).

Bari et al. (2020) found evasive hiding and playing dumb highly detrimental, fostering mistrust and reduced collaboration. KHi may arise from organizational issues, leadership, or antisocial behaviors (Banagou et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2019). Banagou et al. (2021) distinguish KHo-accumulating knowledge without intentional concealment.

Bilginoğlu (2018) describes KHo as deliberately withholding information to retain knowledge and power. Like KHi, KHo reduces Knowledge Sharing (KS) and collaboration, leading to tension and harming both interpersonal and organizational performance (de Garcia, 2020).

Knowledge hiding and KHo are used to retain information when individuals feel threatened or seek protection from uncertainty (Bilginoğlu, 2018; de Garcia, 2020). Hiding conceals requested information, hoarding unrequested. This study examined their interplay in TK sharing.

1.1 Problem Statement

Clear study goals and data collection are essential (Rea & Parker, 2014). A quantitative survey assessed KHo and KHi regarding TK (Peng, 2013), using standardized questions to minimize bias (Brace, 2013) and reveal antecedents like mistreatment and trust (Connelly et al., 2012; Oliveira et al., 2019).

Peng (2013) noted research lacked evidence linking TK as the source of KHi. Unlike EK, TK is personal, difficult to share, and uniquely valuable (Gubbins & Dooley, 2021; Peng, 2013; Singh, 2019). Examining interactions may clarify relationships among TK, trust, and KS (Gubbins & Dooley, 2021).

The study addressed four Research Questions (RQ) on individuals' understanding and motivation for KHo, KHi, and TK sharing. It examined motivations for TK sharing, behavioral traits of KHi, KHo, trust, and TK sharing, and factors promoting both TK and EK sharing.

RQ1: How well do individuals understand the behaviors of knowledge hiding or knowledge hoarding in the workplace?

RQ2: What motivators lead an individual to share tacit knowledge with others in the workplace?

RQ3: Which behavioral characteristics influence an individual's decision to exhibit behaviors of knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding, or to not share tacit knowledge?

RQ4: Which motivators of trust facilitate tacit knowledge sharing?

The study aimed to identify the characteristics and motivators of KHi and KHo behavior. The literature review helps address the barriers and limitations to KS within organizations.

2. Review of Literature

Individuals recognize KS, KHo, KHi as common workplace problems. A literature review explored KS, KHi, KHo, the role of trust, and the importance of TK.

2.1 Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is essential for organizational success, reducing rework, fostering innovation, and improving productivity (de Garcia et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2019). It also ensures valuable knowledge is captured for future use (de Garcia et al., 2020; Gubbins & Dooley, 2021).

Integrating TK into KS boosts learning and innovation, especially when experienced employees depart (de Garcia et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). However, despite leadership efforts to promote sharing, individual behaviors like KHo can limit its effectiveness (Oliveira et al., 2021; Pradhan et al., 2019).

2.2 Knowledge Hoarding

Knowledge hoarding is the intentional accumulation of knowledge, often driven by self-interest or fear of losing power (Aljawarneh et al., 2022; Banagou et al., 2021; Khalid et al., 2020). Unlike KHi, which responds to requests, knowledge hoarding is self-motivated (Banagou et al., 2021; Serenko, 2020).

Ostracism increases KHo, while poor KKS processes and organizational silos foster competition and mistrust (Bilginoğlu, 2018; Khalid et al., 2020). Although KHo may seem selfless, it limits KS, erodes trust, and restricts access to valuable knowledge (Bilginoğlu, 2018). Knowledge hiding also restricts knowledge flow and has become a key focus of recent research.

2.3 Knowledge Hiding

Connelly et al. (2012) emphasized the need for greater KHi research compared to KS. Recent studies continue exploring its motivators and behaviors across organizations and academia (Connelly et al., 2012; Koay & Lim, 2022; Wang & Dong, 2022; Wen et al., 2022).

Connelly et al.'s (2012) definition of KHi as intentional knowledge concealment due to distrust remains foundational. The authors' insights on workplace competition, communication, leadership, and KHi behaviors are still highly relevant.

Knowledge hiding is a deliberate act by individuals or groups to withhold or obscure knowledge from others, often motivated by assumptions, misinformation, or distrust (Connelly et al., 2012). This behavior is particularly common when the knowledge involved is TK rather than EK.

2.4 Tacit Knowledge

Oliveira et al. (2021) reviewed 50 articles on KHi and KHo, but only six addressed the influence of TK or EK (Feng & Wang, 2019; Hearnus et al., 2018; Peng, 2013; Singh, 2019; Skerlavaj et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). These studies primarily examined factors motivating KHi or KHo.

Tacit knowledge is difficult to express because it is experiential, internalized, and "embodied, embodied, and embedded" (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998; Rechberg, 2020). In contrast, EK is easily shared (Gamble, 2020). Organizations often struggle to access TK, especially when its boundaries are unclear (Lanke, 2018).

Poor working conditions and low trust reduce KS and increase KHo and KHi (Rechberg, 2020). Academics often conceal TK for competitive reasons, making trust essential for balancing competition and relationships to enable effective sharing (Gubbins & Dooley, 2021; Hernaus et al., 2019).

2.5 Trust

Trust is generally understood as the willingness to rely on the intentions and actions of others (Kocak, 2023). Within KS contexts, this concept manifests in several distinct forms, including Ability-Based Trust (ABT), Benevolence-Based Trust (BBT), Cognition-Based Trust (CBT), and Competence-Based Trust (CoBT).

Gubbins and Dooley (2021) found that pre-existing relationships favor ABT, while BBT applies more when no prior connection exists; knowledge seeking depends on social identity, trust, and psychological safety. They define ABT as seekers identifying experts by ability and credibility, BBT as holders evaluating the seeker's need and goodwill, and note that CoBT, like ABT, works best in established relationships.

Levin and Cross (2004) emphasize strong relational ties in knowledge transfer, using CoBT as an example. Conversely, Chowdhury (2005) highlights CBT, which relies on evaluating credentials. Both CoBT and CBT ultimately build confidence and encourage KS.

3. Theoretical Background

Knowledge hiding is “an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another individual” (Connelly et al., 2012, p. 2). Unlike KHo, it involves deliberate actions, and is associated with workplace problems like deception, social undermining, and aggression, leading to wider organizational consequences (Connelly et al., 2012).

Bari et al. (2020) found that cultures of KHi and KHo significantly undermine creativity, innovation, performance, and coworker trust. These behaviors erode trust, foster a “climate of silence,” and act as workplace exclusion, especially when combined with bullying. Despite these impacts, the authors research faces several methodological challenges.

Tacit knowledge makes studying KHi and KHo difficult, as participants may struggle to interpret or apply its definition in surveys. This ambiguity, combined with limited follow-up and methodological constraints, can reduce the clarity and depth of research findings.

Small, localized samples and self-reporting introduce bias, while cross-sectional designs limit understanding of KHi in organizations (Banagou et al., 2021; Bari et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2020). Ongoing debates about KHi boundaries highlight the need for more cross-cultural and longitudinal research.

Furthermore, self-report surveys in sensitive areas like KHi and KHo are prone to recall bias, perceptual inaccuracies, and social desirability effects (Aljawarneh et al., 2022; Banagou et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2022; Ford & Staples). To mitigate these issues, researchers suggest using multiple data sources, open-ended questions, and experimental designs to enhance data quality and causal inference (Connelly et al., 2012; Koay & Lim, 2022; Banagou et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2015; Peng, 2013; Singh, 2019; Tian et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2022).

4. Methodology

This study addressed gaps in KHo, KHi, TK, and trust. An 11-stage Survey Design (Rea & Parker, 2014) ensured unbiased data collection from conceptualization to results.

This research followed Rea and Parker's (2014) eleven-stage process. Stage 1: The study's focus and methodology were defined using a quantitative survey with standardized questions to minimize bias. The research was conducted over 42 days, utilizing Qualtrics^{XM} to maximize responses within budget constraints.

Stage 3: A literature review and stakeholder input shaped the survey content, ensuring relevance to KHi, KHo, and knowledge sharing best practices. Stage 4 and 5: The sampling frame focused on IT and KM professionals in the U.S. and Germany, recruited primarily through social media.

Stage 6: Survey items were pre-coded and used a 7-point Likert scale to encourage nuanced, anonymous responses and minimize method bias. Stage 7: The instrument was reviewed by Subject Matter Experts and piloted with 14 IT professionals to enhance clarity and validity.

Stage 8: The survey was self-administered online to accommodate participant diversity and ensure quality and anonymity (Fowler, 2009). Stage 9: The survey was implemented with Qualtrics^{XM}, providing secure, device-agnostic participation and meeting privacy standards (Qualtrics, 2023).

Stage 10: Data were coded automatically for efficient analysis, with closed questions supporting response range and anonymity (Brace, 2013). Stage 11: Analysis commenced after data collection, and findings were prepared for dissemination to stakeholders and publication.

5. Results

Data analysis began with reviewing data collection and cleaning, highlighting the importance of participant demographics. The four RQs and Supporting Survey Questions (SSQ) were analyzed to evaluate survey items related to KHi, KHo, EK, TK, trust behavior, and KS.

5.1 Data Analysis

The data analysis section covers survey development, including validation by two SMEs and a pilot study with 14 experts. The SMEs improved clarity and consistency, while the pilot identified minor grammatical issues and recorded completion times ranging from 6:21 to 37:47.

A Qualtrics^{XM} close-ended survey investigated characteristics and motivators affecting organizational trust and TK sharing. After removing straightlining responses (Reuning & Plutzer, 2020), the sample decreased from 338 to 285 responses.

5.2 Findings

The following sections will detail the seven demographic inquiries. Additionally, a high-level overview of the SSQ that supports the survey's research questions will be discussed.

5.2.1 Demographic data

Participants were almost evenly split between Europe (50.55%) and North America (49.45%), with balanced gender representation (50.35% female, 49.65% male). The majority (61.5%) were aged 34–57, reflecting a fairly even age distribution.

Participants came from 16 industries, mainly Information Technology (28.8%), Office & Administrative (10.5%), Healthcare (10.2%), and Education & Training (10.0%). Most held a college degree, with 74.4% earning a bachelor's or master's.

The majority of participants (73.7%) had over 11 years of work experience. Ethnically, 59% of respondents identified as Caucasian, with the remaining 41% representing a diverse range of ethnicities. This combination of experience and diversity was beneficial in providing valuable feedback on the survey study.

5.2.2 Supporting survey questions

Survey questions were classified as Low Perception (LP) or High Perception (HP) by comparing their mean scores to the weighted average (\bar{x}). Scores below the average were LP; those at or above were HP, enabling trend identification without discounting other responses.

The SSQ for RQ1 for Table 1 assessed participants' comprehension of KHi, KHo, and KS. It also explored their perspectives on coworkers' related behaviors with a weighted mean of 3.71.

Table 1: RQ1 SSQ

Question	\bar{x}	Decision
1) How familiar are you with the concept of KS in the workplace?	5.87	HP
2) How familiar are you with the concept of KHi in the workplace?	4.66	HP
3) How familiar are you with the concept of KHo in the workplace?	4.84	HP
4) How aware are you of coworkers choosing not to KS?	4.83	HP
5) How aware are you of coworkers choosing to partially KS?	5.09	HP
6) Coworkers may withhold knowledge because they consider you a threat.	4.57	HP
7) Coworkers withhold knowledge from you because of personality differences.	4.44	HP

Question	\bar{x}	Decision
8) Coworkers KHo because they don't want you to succeed on a task or project.	3.94	HP
9) Have you ever refrained from KS with a coworker due to personality differences?	2.02	LP
10) When asked a question by a coworker, I respond to suit my needs or outcome.	2.69	LP
11) I keep what I am working on private from coworkers until an appropriate time to KS.	2.84	LP
12) I keep documents and/or resources from coworkers to maintain control of knowledge.	2.91	LP
13) I keep innovative achievements to myself until I can receive recognition.	2.17	LP
14) I choose not to let coworkers know all that I know, even if it could help the coworkers or the organization.	1.94	LP

The SSQ for RQ2 in Table 2 assessed EK and TK comprehension, with most responses indicating a HP for KS upon request. Using the weighted average method, RQ2's SSQ achieved an overall weighted average of 5.22).

Table 2: RQ2 SSQ

Question	\bar{x}	Decision
15) I share EK when requested.	6.13	HP
16) I share TK when requested	5.71	HP
17) I share TK with coworkers when it is reciprocated.	5.16	HP
18) I would help coworkers tackle their issues in the workplace using my TK if compensated through rewards, bonuses, or acknowledgments.	4.53	HP
19) Sharing EK will elevate my status within the workplace	4.79	HP
20) Sharing TK will elevate my status within the workplace.	4.92	HP
21) Sharing TK will gain me more acceptance among coworkers.	5.19	HP
22) Sharing EK increases my competitive advantage in the workplace.	4.58	LP
23) Leadership knows I possess TK useful for solving problems.	5.54	LP
24) Coworkers know I possess TK useful for solving problems.	5.66	LP

Table 3 outlines the SSQs on KHi, KHo, and TK withholding reasons. Applying the weighted average method from prior analysis, RQ3's overall average is 3.98.

Table 3: RQ3 SSQ

Question	\bar{x}	Decision
25) Time is a factor when choosing not to share TK with coworkers.	4.66	HP
26) A lack of trust in coworkers is a factor when choosing not to share TK.	4.54	LP
27) Understanding the power of knowledge is a factor when choosing not to share TK with coworkers	4.32	HP
28) Individuals who possess TK choose not to KS with coworkers.	3.99	HP
29) Trust of coworkers is a factor when choosing not to share TK.	3.28	LP
30) There is not an advantage in sharing TK with coworkers.	2.97	LP
31) There are no negative consequences for not sharing TK with coworkers.	3.28	LP
32) The decision not to share TK can often be influenced by a feeling of importance or power.	4.79	HP

Table 4 outlines factors motivating trust in TK sharing. Applying the weighted average method from prior analysis, RQ4's overall average is 5.27.

Table 4: RQ4 SSQ

Question	\bar{x}	Decision
33) I share relevant TK with coworkers based on their abilities in the workplace.	4.81	LP
34) I share relevant TK with coworkers who are perceived as being credible in the workplace.	5.20	LP
35) I share relevant TK with coworkers who have high standing in the workplace.	4.98	LP
36) I share relevant TK with coworkers who lack knowledge but are sincere in their request.	5.63	LP
37) I show goodwill in sharing relevant TK with coworkers after evaluating their sincerity and potential skill set.	5.36	HP
38) I share relevant TK with coworkers who possess subject matter expertise in the workplace.	5.51	HP
39) I share relevant TK with coworkers who possess exceptional credentials in the workplace.	5.25	LP
40) I share relevant TK with coworkers who are perceived as subject matter experts qualified to share TK.	5.45	HP

6. Discussion

This section discusses the RQs, implications, limitations, and future research from a study of 285 participants. Participants used the Qualtrics^{XM} platform, contributing KM and KS expertise through writing, problem-solving, and reviewing.

6.1 Research Question 1

The primary objective of RQ1 was to assess participants' understanding of KHi and KHo behaviors in the workplace. Through 14 questions, participants reported their familiarity with these behaviors among coworkers. Analysis of SSQs 1–3 in Table 1 showed strong comprehension of KHi, KHo, and KS occurrence.

For SSQ (4–8) revealed HP of coworkers withholding information, often due to personality conflicts or perceived threats. This aligns with KHo behaviors (Bilginoğlu, 2018) and consistent with Psychological Ownership Theory's link to knowledge protection (Ali & Sagsan, 2021).

Participants frequently perceived coworkers KHi and KHo information due to threats or conflicts but reported rarely exhibiting such behaviors themselves. Responses to SSQ (9–14) linked withholding to obstructing others' success, with high coworker awareness despite low self-reported KHi/KHo.

6.2 Research Question 2

For SSQ (15–24) in Table 2 assessed EK and TK understanding, revealing high willingness to share upon request. However, SSQs (17–22) had lower means than the overall average, likely skewed by SSQ 15 and 16's high Likert ratings.

Survey participants reported that reciprocating KS is easier when others share their EK or TK first (15, 16, 17). This supports Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that EK and TK sharing becomes more reciprocal as workplace relationships develop (Singh, 2019).

Many participants viewed sharing EK and TK favorably (19–21), citing financial benefits, status elevation, workplace acceptance, or competitive advantages. Oliveira et al. (2021) further analyzed the KHi and KHo causal relationship.

Participants in SSQs (23 & 24) felt coworkers and leadership recognized their valuable TK. In contrast, SSQs 18 and 22 responses showed low perception of sharing EK driven by rewards, recognition, or competitive advantage.

6.3 Research Question 3

The SSQs (25–32) in Table 3 examined KHi, KHo, and TK withholding reasons. Most participants agreed that tight schedules hinder TK sharing (25), while 28 revealed many withhold TK intentionally.

The SSQs 27 and 32 revealed strong agreement that TK ownership confers power. Tian et al. (2021) assert knowledge inherently grants power, enabling bargaining leverage in organizational decisions, aligning with TK owners' recognition of this dynamic.

The four LP SSQ identified trust, advantage, and consequences as key factors. The results of SSQ 26 and 29 highlighted distrust in coworkers, aligning with Arain et al. (2020) on SET triggered distrust cycles from KHi. Responses to 30 and 31 reflected perceptions of no TK sharing advantage and minimal withholding consequences.

6.4 Research Question 4

The SSQs 33–40 in Table 4 analyzed trust factors in TK sharing, showing split LP and HP responses. In Q33 there was a willingness to share TK regardless of coworkers' abilities, aligning with Gubbins and Dooley's (2021) "in-group" sharing pattern. For SSQ 34 and 35 the LP ratings suggested TK sharing persists regardless of rank if some association exists.

The final LP question (39) assessed whether TK holders share only with coworkers of exceptional ability (Chowdhury, 2005). Results showed a LP, indicating ability is not a strict barrier to receiving TK. However, the mean score of 5.25-close to the weighted average of 5.27-suggests some TK holders may prefer sharing with highly qualified coworkers.

For SSQs 36 and 37 it showed TK sharing willingness via BBT (extended to "out-groups" valuing sincerity), balanced by CBT and CoBT in SSQ 38 and 40. Responses for 36 participants shared TK within "in-groups" (ABT), while SSQ 37 confirmed sharing with skilled coworkers when requests are sincere.

Responses to SSQ 38 (CBT) and 40 (CoBT) responses showed strong TK sharing willingness with capable SMEs (Levin & Cross, 2004), though exceptional credentials alone were not major factors.

6.5 Implications

Participants recognized KHi, KHo, KS, EK, and TK behaviors. While TK-related withholding was rare (driven by time/trust issues), EK/TK sharing occurred when requested, motivated by status and credibility. Denials of withholding for personal gain accompanied sharing upon recognition and explicit requests.

Trust behaviors significantly influenced TK sharing, with ABT encouraging sharing with skilled coworkers and BBT motivating sharing with sincere, even less knowledgeable, requesters. Participants typically shared TK with recognized SMEs, though some were neutral. Consistent with Chowdhury (2005), strong personal connections (i.e., ABT) could override tendencies of KHo, highlighting trust as a key enabler.

The final implication stresses informing leadership about KHi and KHo's negative effects and how coworker trust impacts KS. Active knowledge withholding was evident, with Andreeva and Zappa (2023) linking collaboration to enhanced trust, communication, and innovation opportunities.

6.6 Theoretical Limitations

The study clarifies differences between KHi and KHo, showing both harm trust, collaboration, and performance. It highlights that TK is especially hard to share, challenging traditional KM models. Findings reveal trust is multi-dimensional (i.e., ABT, BBT, CBT and CoBT) and central to KS, KHi, and KHo.

Motivations like fear, self-protection, and lack of trust drive these behaviors, linking intentions to outcomes. The study suggests KM theories should be refined to address TK's complexity, diverse trust forms, and the interplay of individual, relational, and organizational factors.

6.7 Limitations

Although this study included a diverse sample, its cross-sectional design shares the theoretical limitations discussed earlier, capturing only a single moment and missing leadership's impact on trust and knowledge sharing. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand how leadership influences KHo, KHi, EK, and TK sharing over time.

In-person interaction was limited, but about 18% of participants contacted the principal investigator to share insights. An open-ended survey might have captured richer qualitative data on workplace knowledge dynamics.

6.8 Future Research

Future research should 1) consider using longitudinal studies and in-person surveys to data over time and offer deeper insights into KM dynamics and leadership influence on TK; 2) utilize one-on-one discussions to enrich the analysis of KHo, KHi, and TK sharing, despite the topic's sensitivity; and 3) concentrate on TK sharing and the KHo and KHi behaviors occurring among employees, supervisors, and organizational leadership.

Ethics declaration: This research required ethical clearance, which was granted by Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board.

AI declaration: The authors confirm no AI tools were used; only Grammarly and Copilot were used for grammar validation.

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