Knowledge Sharing in Private Social Solidarity Institutions during Pandemics

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic period resulted in a global crisis, whether in the economy, personal or professional life. Because of the pandemic, people and institutions had to change the way they did things. Even though people are becoming more aware of the value of knowledge and it is becoming more common in some institutions, knowledge management methods are still not well known in the social sector and as a key tool for institutions in crisis. Considering the beneficial role that knowledge sharing (KS) practices play in organizations, the current study aims to investigate the impact of KS practices in Portuguese private social solidarity institutions in adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic period. To achieve the purpose and considering the exploratory nature of the research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen professionals from four private social solidarity institutions in northern Portugal. Nvivo processed the interviews. Because COVID-19 is new, there is no research on knowledge sharing in these institutions, so the study can be considered as original. Before and during pandemics, the presence of knowledge sharing practices, such as the integration of new employees, the proactiveness of learning, the sharing of new ideas and mistakes, and the sharing relationship between peers and superiors and other institutions, was observed through the interviews. In this study, we discovered that trust, communication, technology, and social networks, as well as the role of leadership in creating an environment conducive to formal and informal sharing, were elements that facilitated knowledge sharing practices, even throughout the pandemics. During the interviews, both technical directors and employees acknowledged the following: the relationship between superiors and employees in decision-making processes; recognition, feedback and incentives from leaders and the presence of formal and informal communication networks. When it came to sharing, which could happen in a formal or informal setting, employees seemed to prefer informal interactions. To summarise, the institutions were able to adjust to the limits imposed by the pandemic, and the basic practises of KS are part of the daily routine of the organisations analysed.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing practices, private social solidarity institutions, trust, informal sharing, social economy

1. Introduction

The process of globalisation that has taken place in recent decades has changed communities, economies, and procedures, which has necessitated the creation of new answers in the most varied domains (Grinin, 2022). Organizations function in an increasingly complex world due to their size, the goals they set for themselves, and the strategies they devise to achieve those goals. In order to ensure sustainability, competitiveness, and value creation in businesses as well as to help them manage appropriately in light of the current reality, knowledge mastery and application have therefore turned into a valuable asset (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Zaragoza-Sáez et al., 2020).

Thus, the concept of knowledge management emerges in the management field as one of the promising tools that, when used effectively, allow for better results and, as a consequence, greater wealth for organisations (Leal et al., 2016; Gravili et al., 2020). This has a positive impact on the environment in which organisations operate, whether it is social, economic, or environmental (Akhavan et al., 2016; Perez-Trujillo and Lacalle-Calderon, 2020). Knowledge management is founded on knowledge, which stands out as a distinct, valuable, and abundant resource in that it is limitless in both its use and transfer (Nag and Gioia, 2012). Regardless of its distinguishing characteristics, it is critical that appropriate processes and tools exist to maximise the benefit from its exploitation (Donate and de Pablo, 2015). The benefit will never be what was hoped for unless it is managed well, which means that the concept is put into action (Dezi et al., 2019).

1.1 Area of investigation and research questions

Salamon and Anheier, (1992) highlighted five distinguishing characteristics of third sector organisations, the social economy, namely that they are (1) formally structured, (2) privately owned and independent from the government, (3) non-profit distributing, (4) self-governing, and (5) benefiting from voluntary activities.
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(Hardwick, Anderson and Cooper, 2015). To minimise misunderstanding regarding the arbitrary distinction between these names, we will use the more generally used phrase “third sector organisation” (Rees and Mullins, 2016) to refer to any organisation in this category.

In December 2019, the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) became a severe pandemic danger to communities globally, having a serious impact on human health (White and Van Der Boor, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a substantial influence on many parts of public life, including economic, and social factors affected by regulations restricting the distribution system; education, tourism, exports, imports, and transportation systems; and the integration of all of these components (Rela et al., 2022).

For this purpose, the current study will use a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews to examine the impact of KS practises in Portuguese private social solidarity institutions (PSSI) on adaption to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper is structured as follows: In the second section, the pertinent theoretical foundations of knowledge management and knowledge sharing are discussed. The methodology that was utilized in this study is discussed in Section 3. The findings and their discussion are presented in Section 4. In Section 5, a new summary of all of the research's findings is presented, along with the limitations of the study and some suggestions for additional research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Sharing

Bock et al., (2005) define knowledge sharing as the willingness of an individual to share his or her created or acquired knowledge with others. Sharing is a conscious decision made by an individual who participates in the exchange without being compelled to do so.

Knowledge sharing (KS) is a social interaction culture that involves the exchange of employee knowledge, experiences, and abilities throughout an entire department or organisation. Knowledge sharing involves providing employees with access to pertinent information and constructing and employing knowledge networks within firms (Hoegl, Parboteeah and Munson, 2003).

Scholars have become increasingly aware over the past half-century that organisations that are able to transfer knowledge effectively are frequently more productive than others (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Argote and Ingram, 2000; Mostafa and Klepper, 2018).

Despite the crucial function of knowledge sharing in organisations, employees are not always receptive to this practise (Hislop, 2003). As a response to this issue, the following strategies are presented: motivation by superiors and peers (Husted and Michailova, 2002); sharing climate in the organisation (Connelly et al., 2019); promotion of trust (Jarvenpaa and Majchrzak, 2008); financial incentives or recognition (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002); and equity (Bouty, 2000).

To improve and control the usage of knowledge, it is vital to have a deeper comprehension of the factors that influence the outcome of knowledge dissemination operations. Extensive research has been conducted on KS, and multiple authors have found various elements that influence these processes.

In this research facilitator is defined as a factor that positively influences knowledge sharing. This definition relates to Søndergaard, Kerr and Clegg, (2007). Inhibitor is described as a factor with a negative moderating effect, whereas barrier is defined as a component that impedes KS until specified conditions or levels are met.

Numerous critical factors, also known as sharing barriers or inhibitor, frequently obstruct KS behaviours (Riege, 2005). The presence of these barriers can have an impact on an institution’s competitive advantage. As a result, Table 1 presents the most commonly recognised knowledge sharing barriers and facilitators.
As we can see in table 1, the factors that act as obstacles to KS can also serve as boosters for the practice of KS. We are able to draw the conclusion that the obstacles that prevent people from sharing their knowledge are frequently the result of insufficient or non-existent application of the factors that can encourage this practice.

### 3. Research questions, objectives and methodology

Taking into consideration the primary goal of our research and based on the above review of literature, we have formalized the following research questions:

- Does the PSSI implement Knowledge Sharing procedures, according to staff and technical directors?
- What factors in the PSSI operate as facilitators or inhibitors of knowledge sharing?
- Does the Covid-19 pandemic affect PSSI’s existing Knowledge Sharing practices?

Two interview procedures were devised for the current study; one for the technical directors of the institutions and the other for the staff. The interview script was created based on the major theme's literature review (Leal, Cunha and Couto, 2017). The interview methodology was designed to investigate themes such as collaboration, factors supporting KS, KS obstructions, relationships between peers, and relationships between employees and superiors before and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

As previously stated, a qualitative technique was applied in this study, as well as a content analysis. The major data collecting approach was semi-structured interviews, and the study's goal was to obtain answers to the research questions that were addressed. The NVivo programme was utilised to carry out the interview analysis.

The first step consisted of conducting 15 interviews across four institutions with the help of a semi-structured script that was developed using the information gleaned from the literature review. After that, the data from these interviews were coded and processed with the help of the NVivo software.

### 4. Results and discussion

With the assistance of NVivo, three nodes were built, including: i) procedures linked to KM practices; ii) facilitators and inhibitors of KS; iii) Covid-19 and KS practices.

#### 4.1 Procedures linked to KM practices

Regarding the initial node, just two of the fifteen respondents were unable to identify KM practises within their organisations.

As can be seen in the following transcripts, Table 2, the remaining professionals all had at least a rudimentary awareness of the principles, having gained their knowledge through trainings or by studying the practices they encountered in their professional routines and contexts.

### Table 2: Knowledge of the concepts under study in the interviewed institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Citations from interviews:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Existence of knowledge management practices in the institution | “So, since we work in a multidisciplinary team, there has to be the question of sharing knowledge, a little bit from each one’s area. So, I already knew about the concept, but not in such depth.” D10E  
“Yes, I was already aware of it, we get the ideas in training and on a daily basis” C8E |
belonged. During the survey, 16 criteria were mentioned, either spontaneously by the interviews or after being asked directly whenever the interviewees had difficulty replying.

4.2 Facilitators and inhibitors of KS.

Table 3: Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Citations from interviews:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;(...) because there is a sharing, the assistants go to training courses on how to clean and how to do it, and pass it on to the others. Because we all have to know everything, we have to be multi-skilled and sometimes do work that is not within our competence, but is necessary. And everybody benefits from that relationship and that sharing.&quot; A1D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;The idea we have about institutions, especially PSSI, is that they are untouchable, but they are not. It is easy to expose our idea, maybe it is not put into practice, but in the long run we are heard. (...)&quot; A3E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;That's fundamental, and it really has to be for things to work, for things to keep flowing and working well. Because everyone has to know the changes and how things have to work so that there's no doubt.&quot; B4E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;If I make a mistake, I am one of the people who go to the director and tell her what happened. There is that trust and willingness to come and say: 'Look, I admit that I made a mistake'. A2E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;(...) In recent times, in the context of the pandemic, the trainings are in Webinar (...). And there is also a lot of information that I started to send by email. I also created a WhatsApp group,&quot;.C3D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitators of Knowledge Sharing practices</td>
<td>&quot;So yes, those are the policies that are used the most, a general sharing without formality so that everybody knows.&quot; B5E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line with previous research, and according to Table 3 the following facilitating factors were the most frequently mentioned by the interviewees in the current study: trust (von Krogh, 1998; Cohen and Prusak, 2001); communication (Levinthal and March, 1993; Leonard and Sensiper, 1998; De Vries, Van Den Hooff and De Ridder, 2006; Lee et al., 2020); technology and social networks (Kim and Lee, 2006; Yang, Ye and Wang, 2021; Blagov and Anand, 2022); and the role of leadership in creating an environment conducive to formal and informal sharing (Kim and Lee, 2006; Lee et al., 2020), which was acknowledged by both technical directors and employees in the survey conducted and trainings (Kim and Lee, 2006; Castaneda and Durán, 2018).

Along with the factors that promote knowledge sharing, the potential barriers to knowledge sharing were investigated, and often the barriers result from inadequately applied promoting factors. The non-recognition, whether in terms of remuneration or formal recognition in the group, was the most frequently cited factor by some interviewees: "(...) I think we could have been recognised, even if it was something, but it was recognition, even if it was 5 euros in the salary or a day's holiday, I think a person deserved it" C7E. The pandemic itself was identified as yet another factor that was shown to be inhibiting KS.

4.3 Covid-19 and KS practices

Blagov and Anand, (2022) state that the Covid-19 pandemic brought the need for institutions to adapt in a short period of time to new routines such as online work, and simultaneously adapt the KM and KS processes in the institutions, since their routines underwent intense changes.

Throughout the course of the interviews, it became plainly obvious that during the pandemic period, the institutions were required to adjust to a new reality and develop new habits. However, there were a few activities that they were able to keep going, either at the same frequency as before or at a lower frequency, but they did so while still adhering to the necessary safety standards. Activities such as team meetings, communication, the practise of sharing ideas and issues in an informal way, the climate of freedom and openness to share, and training sessions were the activities considered by the interviewees to have been maintained in the institutions during the pandemic period. Although fewer in number and operating under new logistical conditions, these activities were the ones that were considered to have been maintained.
Along with the activities that they were able to maintain or readapt, the pandemic period also led to the adoption of new communication strategies in which virtual communication technologies and networks came to play an important role. This was in addition to the fact that they were able to maintain or readapt the activities that they had been performing previously. The interviewees highlighted the use of phone calls, email, Zoom as a means to hold meetings and participate in training sessions, and WhatsApp. During the time of the pandemic, they were able to keep in contact with one another, maintain a connection with the team, and feel supported thanks to this strategy.

Here are some quotes that support our conclusions: "The technical team meetings continue to happen (...) this issue of talking and sharing has not changed at all." B5E

“(…) In recent times, in the context of the pandemic, the trainings have been delivered via Webinar (...) There is also a lot of information that I have begun to send via email. I also started a WhatsApp group where we use new technologies to get feedback. I always ask if they received, if they understood, and if I can explain or clarify anything.” C3D

Although some activities could be maintained and new habits formed, the interviewees stated that it was a difficult period both personally and professionally. Because they were dealing with something unknown at a time when there was little, and sometimes contradictory, information, interviewees B2D and C3D mentioned the need to change work routines.

Another factor frequently mentioned as a negative aspect during the pandemic period was the General Direction of Health imposed strategy of working in a "bubble" or "mirror team." Both designations correspond to the division of the team into two, with one team providing service for twelve hours for a period of 3 to 15 consecutive days and the other remaining in isolation; at the end of the time period considered by each institution, these teams would swap positions.

“It appeared that the team had been divided into two groups. Then it seemed like there were two groups, and they weren't supposed to mix. It was almost as if my team had done this and my team had done that. But it no longer occurs; it has faded away because they all now collaborate. (...) I belong to this one, and the other belongs to that one.” B5E

“We worked with mirror teams for a long time with great difficulty in bringing people together (...) And it is reflected in the lack of information sharing.” B2D

"Of course, emotionally I was affected (...)” C3D

4.4 Knowledge Sharing as an Advantage for Adaptation during the Pandemic

When interviewees were asked about the impact of their sharing relationship prior to the pandemic on their ability to adapt to it, there was a consensus that the way they worked as a team and shared information with one another had been an asset in adapting to the new reality.

“It helped because it was necessary to maintain that communication, perhaps more with all of us, but I believe there was even more connection because we were anxious and called each other more, even within the group, to discuss what we should do. I believe it was crucial that we were already organised at that time”. A1D

5. Conclusion

Despite the fact that the application of KM is also advantageous in non-profit organisations, the bibliographic support for this relationship lags significantly behind that of KM in for-profit businesses. Consequently, this study contributes to this deficiency in the subject area and demonstrates that, despite the paucity of bibliographic support, institutions recognise the existence of the concept, as well as its application and added value in the reality in which they operate, and continue to develop their practises, as can be seen in the institutions studied.

We were able to respond to the three research questions that prompted this paper. Through the analysis of the interviews, it was possible to confirm that the studied organisations employ some KS and KM practises in their
daily operations. It was also possible to recognise that there are also facilitators and barriers to KS in the social economy, as listed in the consulted literature, even though the majority of these studies have been conducted in the business sector.

Regarding the question of the pandemic’s impact on KS practises, we were able to illustrate what interviewees reported, but due to the topic’s recency, it was not possible to support these results with international studies. This may demonstrate the originality and significance of this exploratory work.

The main conclusion of this work is that even with the strong impact of the pandemic on the whole society for almost two years, these institutions managed to stay organised, even in the face of an uncertain future, because they already had some deep-rooted knowledge sharing and management practices, as well as encouraged, before the pandemic, a facilitating environment for these practices, which somewhat reduced the impact of the pandemic on the interviewed institutions.

One of the KS practices that contributed most positively in the period in question was the use of technology. From holding online meetings through digital platforms, informal contact through calls, or WhatsApp groups, technology became a constant presence in the routines adopted at organisations. We also concluded that the pandemic had the greatest effect on the level of the individual and the relationships between people, but that this effect was felt by all institutions, not just the institutions that were studied.

Despite meeting the proposed objectives, this study has some limitations. The main factors are the size of the unit of analysis and its origin in northern Portugal. The small number of institutions prevents us from making broad comparisons, and the fact that the institutions all belong to the country’s north, despite the fact that it includes institutions from the coast to the interior, may influence the observations made. Because these are PSSI and provide a social service, it is implicit that this is dependent on the social context in which they are located, the city, and the resources they provide.

A mixed qualitative and quantitative study in the post-pandemic phase would be the best approach for future research. This would allow for a more objective examination of this period as well as the long-term impact of the pandemic on the KS practises adopted by the institutions.

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