JSL, 9(8), August 2024: 18 - 27
-

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE AT WORK: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF EMPLOYEE SKILL HOARDING, KNOWLEDGE-SHARING CONSTRAINTS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS

Gurmeet Singh

Research Scholar, Dept. of Management, Chaudhary Charan Singh University Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

Dr. Vinod Kumar

Research Supervisor, Dept. of Management, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

ABSTRACT

Knowledge is a critical organizational resource, but its value depends on the ability of employees to exchange, integrate, and apply it collectively. Employee skill hoarding occurs when individuals retain expertise, experience, techniques, or specialized capabilities rather than making them accessible to colleagues. This paper examines the relationship between skill hoarding, knowledge-sharing constraints, and organizational learning effectiveness. It focuses on how competition, lack of trust, job insecurity, weak interpersonal relationships, inadequate incentives, workplace politics, and performance pressure may influence employees' willingness to share skills. The paper further considers how restricted knowledge flows can reduce collaborative learning, innovation, employee development, problem solving, and organizational adaptability. An empirical perspective is proposed in which employee skill hoarding is treated as an important behavioural factor affecting organizational learning effectiveness. The paper argues that organizations can improve learning outcomes by strengthening trust, psychological safety, leadership support, collaborative incentives, mentoring, knowledge repositories, and opportunities for continuous peer learning.

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

Keywords: Skill hoarding, hidden knowledge, knowledge sharing, organizational learning, employee behaviour, knowledge management, organizational effectiveness

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly compete through knowledge, expertise, innovation, and the ability to learn faster than competitors. Physical resources remain important, but knowledge-based capabilities have become central to organizational effectiveness. Employees possess substantial amounts of explicit and tacit knowledge acquired through education, training, experience, problem solving, and interaction with customers and coworkers. Much of this knowledge is embedded in everyday work practices and may not be formally recorded. Consequently, the willingness of employees to share what they know is essential for converting individual expertise into collective organizational capability. However, employees do not always share knowledge automatically. Some may intentionally or unintentionally retain knowledge, producing a hidden reservoir of expertise that is not fully accessible to the organization.

The distinction between knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding, and knowledge hoarding is important. Knowledge sharing involves providing or exchanging relevant knowledge with others. Knowledge hiding generally refers to an intentional attempt to conceal requested knowledge, while knowledge hoarding may involve accumulating or retaining knowledge without necessarily receiving a direct request for it. These behaviours can overlap but should not be treated as identical. Research has identified different forms of knowledge hiding, including evasive hiding, rationalized hiding, and playing dumb. Understanding these distinctions is useful because organizations may address each behaviour differently. For example, direct knowledge hiding may require attention to interpersonal conflict, whereas generalized hoarding may require changes in organizational culture and incentives.

Knowledge-sharing constraints arise when employees encounter barriers that make knowledge exchange difficult or undesirable. These constraints may be social, psychological, technological, structural, or economic. Employees may fear that sharing knowledge will reduce their individual value, increase competition, create additional workload, or expose mistakes. Some employees may also believe that coworkers have not earned access to their expertise. Organizational conditions can intensify these perceptions when performance systems reward individual achievement more strongly than team development. Evidence

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

from recent research suggests that knowledge behaviours are shaped by interacting individual, team, and organizational factors, including incentives, leadership, communication, belonging, and digitalization.

Organizational learning effectiveness provides an important outcome through which the consequences of hidden knowledge can be understood. An organization learns when knowledge acquired by individuals becomes available for interpretation, dissemination, integration, and application. If employees retain expertise, organizational learning becomes slower and more fragmented. Teams may repeatedly solve problems that have already been solved elsewhere, while new employees may struggle to acquire tacit skills. Therefore, this paper examines employee skill hoarding as a potential constraint on organizational learning effectiveness. The discussion focuses on three areas: the nature and determinants of hidden knowledge at work, knowledge-sharing constraints and their organizational consequences, and the relationship between skill hoarding and organizational learning effectiveness.

II. EMPLOYEE SKILL HOARDING AND THE NATURE OF HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE AT WORK

Skill hoarding can be understood as the retention of valuable knowledge, expertise, experience, or capabilities within an individual rather than their active dissemination throughout the organization. It can involve technical skills, problem-solving methods, customer knowledge, organizational procedures, professional contacts, software expertise, or experience-based shortcuts. Some knowledge is explicit and can be documented relatively easily, while other knowledge is tacit and exists primarily through personal experience. Tacit knowledge is particularly vulnerable to hoarding because it may not be fully captured in manuals or databases. Employees who have developed specialized methods through years of experience can therefore become critical knowledge holders.

The motivations behind skill hoarding are complex. Employees may hoard skills because they believe their expertise provides them with career security or bargaining power. An employee who is the only person capable of performing a difficult task may perceive this uniqueness as protection against redundancy. Others may retain knowledge because they are uncertain about how coworkers will use it. If an employee believes that colleagues may receive credit for shared knowledge, the motivation to share may decline. Workplace competition can therefore transform knowledge from a collective resource into a personal

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

asset. Research has consistently recognized that employees may choose to keep knowledge to themselves even when organizations formally encourage knowledge transfer.

Another explanation concerns organizational identification and meaning. Employees who strongly identify with their work may sometimes develop greater ownership over the knowledge they create. Interestingly, recent research involving employees in India has examined how meaning-making through work, mindfulness, and relational factors may influence knowledge-hoarding tendencies. This suggests that skill hoarding cannot always be explained through negative motives such as selfishness or distrust. In some circumstances, employees may retain knowledge because it is closely connected to their professional identity or because they have developed strong psychological ownership of their expertise.

Workplace relationships also play a central role. Employees are more likely to exchange knowledge when they trust their colleagues and believe that the exchange will be reciprocated. Poor relationships, workplace ostracism, interpersonal conflict, and weak team cohesion can create conditions for knowledge retention. Research on workplace ostracism has found an association between ostracism and knowledge-hoarding behaviour, with defensive silence functioning as an important mechanism. These findings indicate that hidden knowledge may sometimes represent an employee response to perceived exclusion rather than simply a desire for personal advantage.

Organizational structures can further influence skill hoarding. Highly hierarchical environments may restrict informal communication between employees at different levels. Employees may believe that knowledge should be exchanged only through formal channels, reducing spontaneous peer learning. Conversely, excessively decentralized structures without clear knowledge responsibilities may create uncertainty about who should share what information. Digital transformation introduces additional complexity. Organizations may possess collaboration platforms and knowledge repositories, but employees may still avoid contributing if they do not trust the system or if knowledge-sharing responsibilities are unclear. Thus, technological availability does not automatically produce knowledge sharing.

Skill hoarding should therefore be viewed as a multidimensional organizational phenomenon. It emerges through interactions among employee perceptions, workplace relationships, organizational culture, leadership, incentives, job security, and knowledge systems. A systematic literature review found that knowledge hiding and knowledge hoarding are related

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

to knowledge sharing but represent distinct areas of research. Understanding this distinction is essential for organizations that want to diagnose hidden knowledge accurately. Rather than simply instructing employees to "share more," managers need to identify the reasons employees retain knowledge and address the organizational conditions that make knowledge sharing difficult.

III. KNOWLEDGE-SHARING CONSTRAINTS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Knowledge-sharing constraints are the conditions that limit employees' ability or willingness to exchange knowledge. These constraints can originate at several levels. At the individual level, employees may lack confidence, communication skills, time, or motivation to share expertise. At the interpersonal level, distrust, conflict, competition, and weak reciprocity can discourage exchange. At the organizational level, rigid structures, poor leadership, inappropriate incentives, inadequate technology, and weak learning cultures may prevent knowledge from moving effectively. The interaction of these constraints can create a workplace where knowledge exists but remains underutilized.

One major constraint is time pressure. Employees working under intense deadlines may prioritize immediate task completion over mentoring or knowledge sharing. A technically skilled employee may know that training a coworker would be beneficial in the long term but may perceive it as an additional burden in the short term. If managers do not allocate time for mentoring, documentation, and peer learning, knowledge sharing may remain secondary to operational performance. Consequently, organizations need to integrate knowledge-sharing activities into normal work processes rather than treating them as optional activities.

Trust represents another fundamental constraint. Employees generally hesitate to share valuable expertise when they fear that others will exploit their knowledge or receive greater recognition. Trust also influences whether employees believe that knowledge sharing will be reciprocal. When workers repeatedly share knowledge without receiving support in return, they may gradually reduce their contributions. Conversely, cooperative environments can establish norms in which helping others is considered a normal part of work. Knowledge-sharing cultures therefore require consistent managerial behaviour and organizational fairness.

Reward structures may either reduce or reinforce knowledge-sharing constraints. Individual

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

performance appraisal systems that focus exclusively on personal output can create incentives for employees to retain expertise. Employees may conclude that sharing knowledge benefits coworkers but does not contribute to their own evaluation. Organizations can address this issue by recognizing mentoring, collaborative problem solving, training contributions, documentation, and team performance. Rewards do not necessarily need to be financial. Professional recognition, career opportunities, peer appreciation, and leadership acknowledgement can also encourage knowledge contribution.

Another important constraint is fear of losing status or influence. Expertise can provide employees with authority, recognition, and informal power. If sharing knowledge is perceived as reducing this advantage, employees may consciously or unconsciously restrict access. This problem is especially important in organizations where promotions and influence are strongly connected to being perceived as the expert. Managers should therefore redefine expertise as the capacity to develop others rather than simply being the person who knows the most. Expert employees can be rewarded for creating successors and expanding team capability.

The consequences of knowledge-sharing constraints are significant. Research has linked knowledge-related withholding behaviours with difficulties in knowledge transfer, organizational relationships, learning, and performance. A large meta-analysis covering 104 studies and 31,822 employees demonstrates the extensive empirical attention given to knowledge hiding and its antecedents and outcomes. When knowledge-sharing constraints remain unresolved, organizations may experience slower decision-making, repeated mistakes, reduced innovation, weaker teamwork, and increased dependency on key employees. Consequently, knowledge sharing should be treated as a central organizational process rather than a voluntary interpersonal courtesy.

IV. EMPLOYEE SKILL HOARDING AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS

Organizational learning effectiveness refers to the degree to which an organization successfully acquires, interprets, shares, retains, and applies knowledge to improve its activities. Learning occurs when individual experiences are transformed into collective understanding and subsequently incorporated into organizational practices. Employee skill hoarding threatens this transformation because it keeps knowledge concentrated within

E-mail: editor.jslsci888@gmail.com

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

individual employees. An organization may therefore possess substantial individual expertise while demonstrating relatively weak collective learning. The difference between individual competence and organizational capability becomes particularly visible when experienced employees leave or when teams need to respond rapidly to new challenges.

The first effect of skill hoarding is reduced knowledge dissemination. Employees who retain specialized knowledge provide fewer opportunities for coworkers to learn. This can increase organizational dependence on particular individuals. If a key employee is absent, other employees may lack the skills necessary to continue the work. Such dependence reduces organizational resilience. Effective learning organizations therefore attempt to distribute critical knowledge across teams through mentoring, documentation, cross-training, and collaborative work. These mechanisms convert individual knowledge into a more stable organizational resource.

The second effect concerns organizational innovation. Innovation requires employees to combine different forms of knowledge. Technical knowledge, customer experience, market information, managerial understanding, and creative thinking can produce innovative outcomes when they are integrated. Skill hoarding limits this combination. Employees may work efficiently within their own areas but remain unaware of valuable knowledge available elsewhere in the organization. Knowledge silos can consequently reduce cross-functional innovation and make organizations less adaptable.

The third effect is reduced employee development. Employees learn not only through formal training but also through observation, mentoring, discussion, and participation in complex tasks. When experienced workers retain expertise, junior employees may receive fewer opportunities to develop advanced capabilities. This can create a cycle in which only a small number of employees possess critical skills. Such concentration increases succession risks and can create frustration among employees seeking career growth. Mentoring and job rotation can counter this problem by deliberately exposing employees to different knowledge domains.

The fourth effect involves organizational memory. Organizations develop memory through routines, systems, documents, databases, stories, practices, and employee experience. If important knowledge exists only in individuals, organizational memory becomes fragile. Employee turnover can therefore result in significant knowledge loss. Documentation and

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

knowledge repositories are useful, but organizations must also capture tacit knowledge through interviews, mentoring, communities of practice, demonstrations, and collaborative problem solving. The objective should not be to document every detail but to preserve knowledge that is strategically important.

The fifth effect is reduced adaptability. Modern organizations operate in environments characterized by technological change, changing customer expectations, regulatory developments, and competitive pressures. Adaptability requires rapid learning and knowledge integration. Organizations in which employees share knowledge can respond more quickly because employees build on one another's experiences. Organizations characterized by skill hoarding may respond more slowly because information is fragmented. Recent research on knowledge behaviours highlights the importance of leadership, communication, incentives, transparency, belonging, and digitalization in shaping whether employees share, hide, hoard, or otherwise manage knowledge.

Finally, organizational learning effectiveness can be improved through an integrated knowledge-sharing strategy. Managers should identify critical skills, map organizational expertise, create mentoring arrangements, encourage cross-functional teams, establish collaborative knowledge repositories, and include knowledge contribution in performance evaluation. Psychological safety should be strengthened so that employees feel comfortable asking questions and acknowledging limitations. Leadership should demonstrate knowledge-sharing behaviour rather than merely demanding it. When these mechanisms are integrated, employee expertise can become a collective organizational asset. The organization then moves from dependence on hidden individual knowledge toward a learning system capable of continuously acquiring, distributing, and applying knowledge.

V. CONCLUSION

Hidden knowledge at work represents a significant challenge for organizations that depend on employee expertise and continuous learning. Employee skill hoarding may arise from job insecurity, competition, professional identity, psychological ownership, distrust, workplace relationships, organizational politics, or inadequate reward systems. It is therefore important to avoid viewing skill hoarding solely as selfish behaviour. Employees respond to the social and structural environment in which they work, and organizational practices can either encourage or discourage the retention of knowledge.

E-mail: ***editor.jslsci888@gmail.com***

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

Knowledge-sharing constraints further influence the relationship between skill hoarding and organizational effectiveness. Lack of time, weak trust, performance pressure, inappropriate incentives, fear of losing status, poor leadership, and inadequate knowledge-management systems can restrict the movement of knowledge. These constraints can result in knowledge silos, weak collaboration, reduced innovation, limited employee development, repeated mistakes, and excessive dependence on particular employees. Consequently, organizations should identify the specific barriers that prevent employees from transferring their skills.

The relationship between skill hoarding and organizational learning effectiveness is particularly important. Organizational learning requires knowledge to move from individuals to teams and from teams into organizational routines and systems. When critical expertise remains concentrated within individuals, organizations become vulnerable to employee turnover and operational disruption. Conversely, mentoring, cross-training, job rotation, documentation, communities of practice, collaborative projects, and digital knowledge repositories can transform individual expertise into organizational capability.

In conclusion, organizations should develop a culture in which knowledge sharing is regarded as a source of professional value rather than a threat to individual importance. Managers should reward employees who develop others, strengthen psychological safety, promote trust, and provide sufficient time for knowledge exchange. Skill hoarding can be reduced when employees understand that sharing expertise enhances rather than diminishes their organizational value. Building such an environment can strengthen organizational learning effectiveness, innovation, resilience, employee development, and long-term competitiveness. The central challenge for modern organizations is therefore not simply to acquire knowledge but to ensure that valuable employee knowledge becomes accessible, transferable, and collectively useful.

REFERENCES

Arain, G. A., Bhatti, Z. A., Hameed, I., Khan, A. K., & Rudolph, C. W. (2024). A meta-analysis of the nomological network of knowledge hiding in organizations. Personnel Psychology. https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12562

Cohen, W. M., & Levinthal, D. A. (1990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. Administrative Science Quarterly, 35(1), 128–152.

Online ISSN: 2456-1495
CODEN (USA): JSLOBJ

Connelly, C. E., Zweig, D., Webster, J., &Trougakos, J. P. (2012). Knowledge hiding in organizations. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 33(1), 64–88. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.737

Connelly, C. E., Černe, M., Dysvik, A., &Škerlavaj, M. (2019). Understanding knowledge hiding in organizations. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 40(7), 779–782. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2407

Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W., & White, R. E. (1999). An organizational learning framework: From intuition to institution. Academy of Management Review, 24(3), 522–537.

Huber, G. P. (1991). Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures. Organization Science, 2(1), 88–115.

Oliveira, M., Curado, C., & Garcia, P. S. (2021). Knowledge hiding and knowledge hoarding: A systematic literature review. Knowledge and Process Management, 28(3), 277–294. https://doi.org/10.1002/kpm.1671

Serenko, A., &Bontis, N. (2016). Understanding counterproductive knowledge behavior: Antecedents and consequences of intra-organizational knowledge hiding. Journal of Knowledge Management, 20(6), 1199–1224.

Wang, S., & Noe, R. A. (2010). Knowledge sharing: A review and directions for future research. Human Resource Management Review, 20(2), 115–131.

Wasko, M. M., & Faraj, S. (2005). Why should I share? Examining social capital and knowledge contribution in electronic networks of practice. MIS Quarterly, 29(1), 35–57.