

A Literature Review on Knowledge Hiding

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive literature review on knowledge hiding (KH), a prevalent yet detrimental organizational behavior. It begins by defining KH as the intentional concealment or withholding of requested knowledge, distinguishing it from related concepts like knowledge hoarding, sharing, and counterproductive work behaviors. The review identifies three primary dimensions of KH: evasive hiding, playing dumb, and rationalized hiding, and outlines the commonly used measurement scales. It then systematically synthesizes the antecedents of KH, categorized into individual factors (e.g., prosocial motivation, psychological safety, territoriality), interpersonal factors (e.g., interactional justice, task interdependence), and organizational factors (e.g., ethical leadership, abusive supervision, knowledge sharing climate). Additionally, the review examines the negative outcomes of KH, including reduced employee performance (creative, extra-role, and task performance), decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover intention, and the fostering of distrust and reciprocal knowledge hiding. Finally, the paper discusses the theoretical and practical implications of understanding KH, highlighting its significance for organizational management and future research directions.

Keywords

Knowledge Hiding, Knowledge Hoarding

1. Introduction

Knowledge is a critical resource in organizations. For this reason, knowledge sharing, defined as “...the act of providing knowledge to others...” is vital for the long-term sustainability and competitive advantage of organizations [1]. Knowledge sharing within organizations is only possible when employees who create, use, and possess knowledge are willing to voluntarily share their knowledge with others [1]. To promote knowledge sharing, organizations have made numerous efforts, such as setting up suggestion boxes, rewarding knowledge sharing, or implement-

ing sophisticated knowledge management systems to encourage internal knowledge sharing [2].

However, despite these efforts, knowledge hiding—defined as “an individual’s intentional concealment or withholding of knowledge requested by another person”—has become an increasingly prevalent workplace behavior [3]. Unlike knowledge sharing, knowledge hiding undermines the economic and competitive value of organizations by increasing turnover intention [4], fostering reciprocal knowledge hiding [5], creating distrust [6], damaging relationships [5], and promoting counterproductive work behaviors [7]. According to Babcock, Fortune 500 companies lose approximately \$31.5 billion annually due to employee knowledge hiding behaviors. Given its potential impact on organizational human and financial performance, knowledge hiding has emerged as a prominent research trend in the fields of organizational behavior and knowledge management [8].

First, when proposing the concept of knowledge hiding, Connelly [9] argued that knowledge hiding is not merely the opposite of knowledge sharing, but a distinct negative behavior representing employees’ intentional concealment of knowledge they possess. In contrast, knowledge sharing is a proactive behavior in which employees voluntarily share their knowledge with others. Knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing are relatively independent behaviors with distinct characteristics and motivational antecedents [9].

Despite these conceptual differences, Connelly noted that a lack of knowledge sharing does not imply the existence of knowledge hiding, yet many studies treat knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing interchangeably [9]. For instance, research has shown that negative workplace outcomes (e.g., turnover intention, distrust) are positively correlated with knowledge hiding and negatively correlated with knowledge sharing [4].

Second, Connelly defined knowledge hiding as a multidimensional construct consisting of evasive hiding (*i.e.*, the hider intentionally provides incorrect or incomplete information or falsely promises to provide the requested knowledge in the future), playing dumb (*i.e.*, the hider acts as if they do not know the requested knowledge), and rationalized hiding (*i.e.*, the hider provides justifications for not disclosing the requested knowledge). Drawing on interdependence theory [10], Connelly proposed that employees’ choices of these specific knowledge hiding behaviors may be influenced by their perceptions of the situation and expectations of the future consequences of the selected behavior. For example, evasive hiding (including active deception) may be a more likely strategy when employees (1) perceive the environment as highly competitive and (2) anticipate negative reactions from the target. Additionally, rationalized hiding, which does not involve active deception, may be more likely in cooperative environments where knowledge hidings wish to avoid negative reciprocal responses from the target [5].

2. Research Significance of Knowledge Hiding

Knowledge hiding is defined as an individual’s act of withholding or intentionally

deceiving others when faced with requests for knowledge [9]. The 21st century is an era of knowledge economy, where the exchange and sharing of knowledge and information have driven the prosperity of business and technology. In all industries, the acquisition, exchange, and application of knowledge are essential for maintaining a competitive edge. Existing research indicates that knowledge hiding directly affects corporate performance and vitality [11]. Generally, a thriving and promising enterprise boasts a strong internal knowledge sharing atmosphere. The collision of ideas between employees and collaborative communication among teams can significantly improve overall operational efficiency. However, it is difficult for anyone in an organization to be completely forthcoming when asked for help, which largely hinders the generation of superior solutions through brainstorming among members. As an inevitable organizational issue, knowledge hiding demands the attention of enterprise managers. It is meaningful to systematically understand the antecedents and consequences of knowledge hiding, so that managers can identify and avoid behaviors that trigger knowledge hiding from a theoretical perspective. Effective management of knowledge hiding also brings positive value to enterprises. Research on knowledge hiding began in 2012, and scholars have explored its antecedents and consequences to varying degrees. Regarding its outcomes, studies mainly focus on the negative impacts of knowledge hiding, arguing that it harms harmonious interpersonal relationships among employees and impedes organizational growth and development.

3. Concept and Connotation of Knowledge Hiding

Knowledge Hiding (KH) is a pervasive behavior in interpersonal interactions, defined as an individual's act of withholding or intentionally deceiving others when faced with requests for knowledge. Connelly further divided knowledge hiding into three specific dimensions: Evasive Hiding, Playing Dumb, and Rationalized Hiding. Evasive hiding refers to the knowledge hider telling the inquirer they will provide answers later but having no real intention to do so; playing dumb means the hider pretends not to know the relevant information or understand the question; rationalized hiding involves explicitly informing the inquirer of reasons for not disclosing the information [11].

With the deepening of research, Yuan argued that knowledge hiding should not be limited to the three original dimensions and proposed new research objects such as Bullying Hiding, Perceived Knowledge Hiding [12], Supervisor Knowledge Hiding, and Leader-Signaled Knowledge Hiding. Finally, it is necessary to distinguish knowledge hiding from concepts such as knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding in research [13].

4. Discrimination between Knowledge Hiding and Similar Concepts

Knowledge hiding is placed among a group of potentially related but distinct behaviors: knowledge hoarding, knowledge sharing, counterproductive work behavior

(CWB), workplace aggression, workplace social undermining, workplace incivility, and deception. Although there may be some conceptual overlap between knowledge hiding and other workplace behaviors, knowledge hiding is a unique construct that broadens our understanding of knowledge transfer. For example, although no prior research has focused specifically on knowledge hiding, knowledge hoarding may overlap with it conceptually and empirically to some extent.

4.1. Conceptual Discrimination between Knowledge Hiding and Knowledge Hoarding

Knowledge hoarding refers to the act of accumulating knowledge that may or may not be shared in the future [14]. Both knowledge hiding and hoarding can be described as a spectrum of behaviors categorized as withholding knowledge. However, unlike knowledge hiding—which represents intentional concealment of knowledge in response to another’s request—knowledge hoarding captures the accumulation of knowledge that is not necessarily requested by others [15]. The intentionality of knowledge hiding and the broader range of methods for engaging in it further highlight its fundamental differences from knowledge hoarding.

4.2. Conceptual Discrimination between Knowledge Hiding and Knowledge Sharing

It is also important to distinguish knowledge hiding from knowledge sharing. We argue that knowledge hiding is not merely the absence of sharing; rather, it is the intentional concealment or withholding of knowledge requested by another person. While comparisons of knowledge hiding and sharing may suggest that individuals either share or hide their knowledge, we contend that these variables are not opposites but two conceptually distinct constructs. Behaviorally, the two constructs may appear similar, but the motivations behind hiding knowledge and lacking knowledge sharing are vastly different. Knowledge hiding can stem from various motives (e.g., prosocial, instrumental, laziness), while a lack of knowledge sharing may simply result from not possessing the knowledge itself. For instance, an employee may receive a knowledge request and choose to share it. Alternatively, they may not have the knowledge to share. This person does not intend to hide knowledge; they are simply unable to engage in sharing. In other words, knowledge hiding does not include cases where employees fail to share knowledge due to error, accident, or ignorance. Conversely, if an employee receives a knowledge request and acts to hide knowledge (e.g., pretending not to know it), this constitutes knowledge hiding.

4.3. Conceptual Discrimination between Knowledge Hiding and Counterproductive Work Behavior

Knowledge hiding also differs from counterproductive work behavior (CWB). These behaviors include actions taken by employees “intended to harm the organization and its members” [16]. In contrast, knowledge hiding behaviors are not necessarily intended to cause harm; some employees may hide knowledge to pro-

tect themselves or colleagues (e.g., to avoid hurting someone's feelings). It is also important to note that CWB can be directed at individuals or the organization itself (e.g., sabotage, theft), whereas knowledge hiding occurs in response to an individual's request.

5. Dimensions and Measurement of Knowledge Hiding

Existing research mostly measures knowledge hiding using questionnaire surveys, with scholars collecting self-reported evaluations of knowledge hiding behaviors from respondents. The measurement of knowledge hiding is relatively unified and mature. This study adopts the scale developed by Connelly, which includes 3 dimensions and 12 items. The scale is divided into three categories: evasive hiding, rationalized hiding, and playing dumb [17]. Evasive hiding focuses on procrastination, prevarication, and substitution behaviors, e.g., "When asked by a colleague, I might agree to help but have no real intention to do so"; rationalized hiding centers on plausible excuses, e.g., "When asked by a colleague, I might explain that the information is confidential and only available to personnel on specific projects"; playing dumb involves feigning ignorance. Reliability analysis shows that the Cronbach's α coefficient of this scale in this study is 0.936.

6. Influencing Factors of Knowledge Hiding

Organizational behavior research indicates that employees' work attitudes and behaviors are influenced by individual characteristics such as personality and psychological states [18]. In the knowledge hiding literature, common antecedents include prosocial motivation, avoidance motivation, learning goal orientation, psychological safety, negative affectivity, dark triad personality, territoriality, work engagement, and psychological contract breach.

6.1. Individual Factors as Antecedent Variables of Knowledge Hiding

6.1.1. Prosocial Motivation

Prosocial motivation refers to an individual's desire to increase effort out of concern for helping others. Employees with high prosocial motivation emphasize positive work environments, values, and norms that encourage mutual cooperation and assistance even without requests [19]. Given these positive traits, employees with high prosocial motivation are less likely to engage in knowledge hiding.

6.1.2. Avoidance Motivation

Avoidance motivation is a behavioral activation to avoid losses and negative outcomes [20]. Rhee and Choi [21] argued that employees with this motivation tend to hide knowledge because they fear their incompetence will be exposed through irrelevant knowledge sharing. In other words, avoidant employees tend to hide knowledge and maintain a facade to prevent anticipated embarrassment and shame from negative evaluations of their shared knowledge [22].

6.1.3. Learning Goal Orientation

Learning goal orientation refers to employees' focus on mastering new skills and knowledge, believing their abilities can be improved through strong learning motivation [23]. Employees with high learning goal orientation generally view colleagues as collaborators and information exchange as reciprocal. Driven by self-development and future success, these employees exhibit lower knowledge hiding behaviors [24].

6.2. Interpersonal Factors as Antecedent Variables

Employees' work attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the nature of interpersonal social interactions with colleagues. Knowledge hiding research shows that various interpersonal characteristics—interactional justice, task interdependence, and perceived competition with colleagues—are important predictors of knowledge hiding behaviors.

6.2.1. Interactional Justice

Interactional justice refers to the perceived fairness and quality of interpersonal treatment employees receive during procedural implementation and outcome determination [25]. It fosters a trusting climate that discourages negative work behaviors [26]. Thus, employees who perceive interactional justice are less likely to exhibit knowledge hiding behaviors [27].

6.2.2. Task Interdependence

Task interdependence refers to the extent to which employees' work relies on others or is interconnected [28]. It is a force that connects employees through shared goals to promote cooperation [29]. Work environments characterized by task interdependence strengthen interpersonal relationships and discourage employees from hiding or concealing knowledge from each other.

6.2.3. Perceived Competition

Perceived competition refers to the extent to which goal achievement is mutually exclusive among employees, often encouraged by managers to improve performance and organizational effectiveness [30]. Organizations implement tangible and intangible incentives and reward systems to support managers in fostering competition. In such competitive environments, cooperation and sharing may be seen as detrimental to individual goal attainment (*i.e.*, mutually exclusive goals). Thus, intense competition does not always yield positive outcomes; it can also lead to adverse effects such as knowledge hiding.

6.3. Organizational Factors as Antecedent Variables

Situational factors (e.g., job characteristics, policies, leadership, context) significantly influence employees' work attitudes and behaviors [31]. The knowledge hiding literature highlights leader-member exchange, ethical leadership, empowering leadership, abusive supervision, organizational knowledge sharing climate, organizational identification, organization-based psychological ownership, job

autonomy, job insecurity, and workplace mistreatment as common organizational antecedents.

6.3.1. Leader-Member Exchange

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory posits that leaders develop distinct exchange relationships with subordinates using different approaches [32]. In high-quality LMX relationships, leaders provide subordinates with exchange resources such as respect, care, and trust, and subordinates reciprocate with prosocial organizational behaviors. Thus, employees in high-quality exchange relationships are likely to respond positively to colleagues' knowledge requests and avoid knowledge hiding [33].

6.3.2. Ethical Leadership

Ethical leaders demonstrate honesty, altruism, and concern for followers' needs through their actions. Ethical leadership is defined by fairness, responsibility, honesty, and care for subordinates' professional and personal needs [34]. Thus, ethical leaders establish personal and organizational norms that make subordinates less likely to engage in knowledge hiding [35].

6.3.3. Empowering Leadership

Empowering leadership refers to a set of person-centered leadership behaviors aimed at empowering followers in leader-follower dyads [36]. It focuses on developing followers' maximum potential by trusting their abilities and granting them autonomy to exercise creativity without fear of leader evaluation. Thus, followers experiencing empowering leadership are less likely to engage in knowledge hiding.

6.4. Characteristics of Knowledge

Connelly argued that the inherent characteristics of knowledge (e.g., knowledge complexity, knowledge-based psychological ownership) may influence employees' knowledge hiding behaviors. They specifically noted that most employee rewards are based on task performance. Responding to knowledge requests consumes significant time, reducing time available for core activities [37]. Knowledge complexity—employees' perception that requested knowledge is difficult to communicate—increases the likelihood of knowledge hiding.

Knowledge-based psychological ownership refers to employees' strong sense of possession and attachment to their work knowledge [38]. Employees' psychological ownership of "what they know" makes them less likely to share knowledge, as it may cause psychological conflict [39]. Thus, employees who view their knowledge as a valuable asset (*i.e.*, strong knowledge-based psychological ownership) may hide knowledge from others.

7. Outcomes of Knowledge Hiding

Research on employee performance is a core focus of management studies. Three dimensions of employee performance—creative and innovative performance, ex-

tra-role performance, and task performance—are the most frequently investigated performance behaviors [40].

7.1. Outcome Variables of Individual Employee Performance

7.1.1. Creative and Innovative Performance

Creative and innovative performance is defined as employees' proficiency in generating and implementing new ideas [41]. It has become an important dimension of individual performance, critical for modern organizations to maintain competitive advantage.

A key driver of creative and innovative performance is knowledge sharing with others, including processes such as obtaining colleague support. Thus, employees' knowledge sharing behaviors are positively correlated with creative and innovative performance, while knowledge hiding is negatively correlated [42].

7.1.2. Extra-Role Performance

Extra-role performance refers to prosocial behaviors (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, voice behavior, helping behavior) that are not included in job descriptions or formally recognized in performance evaluations but are highly useful for organizational effectiveness. Extra-role behaviors include helping others, and sharing knowledge deemed critical to organizational operations is a common form of extra-role performance. Employees' positive work attitudes and behaviors (e.g., knowledge sharing) are positively correlated with workplace extra-role performance [43], while negative attitudes and behaviors including knowledge hiding are negatively correlated.

7.1.3. Task Performance

Task performance refers to necessary behaviors that are part of job descriptions and formally recognized in performance evaluations [44]. It is the core feature of one's job. Employees perceive that knowledge hiding produces adverse organizational outcomes, as colleagues form a cycle of mutual distrust with knowledge hidiers, ultimately negatively impacting the hidiers' creativity and task performance. Thus, employees engaged in knowledge sharing tend to have higher task performance, while knowledge hiding may negatively affect their task performance [45].

7.2. Outcome Variables of Attitudes and Interpersonal Relationships

Knowledge hiding is an unethical and counterproductive work behavior that profoundly affects employees' positive work attitudes and interpersonal relationships. This category includes four notable outcomes of knowledge hiding: job satisfaction, turnover intention, distrust, and reciprocal knowledge hiding.

7.2.1. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is one of the most frequently studied positive work attitudes and is considered an important positive antecedent of employee performance. In con-

trast, turnover intention is another widely studied negative work attitude, established as a significant negative antecedent of employee performance [46].

7.2.2. Turnover Intention

Research shows that knowledge hiding is negatively correlated with job satisfaction and positively correlated with turnover intention, as knowledge hiding is perceived as violating organizational norms, and employees engaging in such behaviors receive negative feedback from the environment (e.g., appropriate sanctions). This treatment makes employees fear punishment for repeated behaviors, ultimately reducing job satisfaction and increasing turnover intention.

7.2.3. Distrust

Distrust is interpreted as a trustor's negative expectations of the other party's intentions and behaviors in a relationship [47]. Employees experiencing interpersonal distrust feel the need to protect themselves through knowledge hiding, fearing their knowledge sharing efforts will not be reciprocated.

7.2.4. Reciprocal Knowledge Hiding

Reciprocal knowledge hiding refers to multiple parties hiding knowledge from each other simultaneously. Research shows that employees' experiences of colleagues hiding knowledge shape their beliefs, intentions, and actions toward reciprocal knowledge hiding [48].

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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