

Exploring the Reason for Tacit Knowledge Sharing and Knowledge Hiding of Skilled employees at a Small Family Firm in China

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1. Introduction

In the highly competitive business environment, family enterprises represent the backbone of the economy in different countries; meanwhile, they face tremendous challenges of survival [1]. There is the same issue in China, family firms taking up to 85.4% of all enterprises have produced over 60% of GDP growth, whereas 80% of them were at a small size with a high survival risk [2]. In this context, resource of knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge from skilled employees, is the key to survival of small family firms [3], since the unique and hard-to-imitate tacit knowledge could help small family firms to create value and technology innovation [3, 4]. However, it is hard for small family firm to obtain it from skilled people, because tacit knowledge resides in people's minds; and sharing it highly relies upon individual motivations or outside interventions by organisations [5]. Concurrently, employees may autonomously choose to hide tacit knowledge while sharing [6], which refers to an autonomous motivational perspective [1, 5, 6]. Self-determination theory (SDT) [7] has been widely used to explain the autonomous motivation in sharing knowledge in existing literature [1, 5, 6]. However, there is little research on tacit knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding at the same time [1, 6, 8]. Therefore, the presented research aims to address this gap by focusing on the small family firm context based on SDT. The aim of this research is to explore why skilled employees choose to share or hide knowledge in small family business. In order to address this main question, there are three specific research questions surrounding this aim:

- In what ways do skilled employees perceive their tacit knowledge in the case company?
- How they knowledge shared?
- Why do they share or hide tacit knowledge?

2. Literature review

2.1. Tacit knowledge, knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding

Tacit knowledge includes subjective ideas, intuitions, and personal understandings and judgements, mainly coming from individual previous experience [4]. As such, tacit knowledge is likely to be experience-based [4, 9]. Sharing knowledge is perceived as a basic act of making knowledge available to others, converting from a person to others requiring knowledge [9]. From social interaction perspective, knowledge sharing resides in various interaction activities among employees in the organisation [9, 10]. Hence, tacit knowledge sharing is both a personal behaviour and forms of interaction among people in organisational life [4, 9, 10]. Within the organisation, knowledge is often shared through four mechanisms: sharing to organisational databases, in formal interactions, in informal interactions and within communities of practice [10]. These almost covers diverse types of sharing [10]. As such, it provides a theoretical foundation for this study to explore how skilled employees share tacit knowledge in a small family firm.

Along with sharing, individuals with the ownership of the knowledge may decide to hide knowledge [6]. Knowledge hiding is an intentional act to withhold knowledge when another person requests knowledge, including evasive hiding, rationalised hiding and playing dumb [6]. Knowledge hiding seems to be a problem of knowledge sharing [6], whereas other researchers insisted that knowledge sharing and hiding may not be opposite, because sometimes hiding knowledge is to avoid hurting others' feelings [11]. Hence, investigating knowledge hiding could help to increase the understanding of knowledge sharing, in particular when studying knowledge sharing and hiding simultaneously [11].

2.2. *Reasons for tacit knowledge sharing and hiding*

Tacit knowledge sharing and hiding are influenced by organisational context and personal motivation. Following the research question, investigating knowledge sharing and hiding needs to look into the context of family business, such as its family involvement and nepotism, the central role of the owner manager and etc., [3, 8]. Existing literature shows these characteristics highly impact employees' knowledge sharing and hiding. For example, family business has the advantage of strong relationships between members, which related to tacit knowledge transfer [8]. Family firms seek to formalise knowledge sharing processes, which influences tacit knowledge sharing so that it is less fluid than it could be [3]. It is less likely to use incentive methods in this context to motivate employees' knowledge sharing because of limited resources [1, 8]. Jealousy is, common among family and non-family members, often fueled by the desire to have another individual's position, causing hiding [8]. Thus, organisational context of family firm largely affects employees' knowledge sharing and hiding.

Considering knowledge sharing as a personal autonomous behaviour, self-determination theory (SDT) is valuable to explain tacit knowledge sharing from the perspective of individual motivations [1, 5]. In SDT, motivation is divided into different types: autonomous (intrinsic and identified motivation) and controlled motivations (external and introjected regulation) [7]. In knowledge sharing research, it is discovered that knowledge self-efficacy and trust considered as the autonomous motivation, affect knowledge sharing [1]. On the other hand, controlled motivation, such as rewards, either inspires or hinders employees' knowledge sharing [1, 5]. Yet, SDT has been applied less to researching knowledge sharing in the context of the small family firm [1, 5]. Hence, this study adopted SDT as the theoretical foundation by drawing upon the small family business.

3. Methodology

This study has adopted the single case study strategy and qualitative research methods, because it is better to address the research question — exploring why skilled employees share or hide tacit knowledge in a small family business. The case company is a critical case where its 30-year survival thanks to the skilled employees' knowledge; and its training and development programmes are widely acknowledged in the local area. As discussed, tacit knowledge is embedded in people's minds; and sharing or hiding is relevant to the personal intention [4, 5, 8], so knowledge sharing and hiding much depend on how people perceive and interpret these behaviours from stories and experience. The data was collected from corporate documentation analysis and 1-hour semi-structured interview with 22 skilled employees at the fieldwork. The 22 participants embraced family members and non-family employees from the different departments and three hierarchies: owner-manager, employees at the manager level and employee level. Template analysis method was used to analyse the data in Nvivo 12.

4. Main findings

The study has found tacit knowledge possesses the experience-based trait; and is shared or hidden by the skilled employees concurrently in the case company. The different personal motivations and organisational characteristics influence the skilled employees' knowledge sharing or hiding. Some of reasons for sharing and hiding are overlapped, such as a close interpersonal relationship, facilitating to better understand that knowledge sharing and hiding are not mutually opposite, but codependent.

Regarding to the three research questions, tacit knowledge has a distinctively experience-based characteristic. The non-family skilled people perceive tacit knowledge as individual asset, whilst the family members believe it should belong to the company. Second, tacit knowledge is shared in the formal training activities and informal occasions, such as when helping others. Along with sharing, knowledge hiding could take place in the meantime. Third, the positive organisational context at the small family firm, such as the support from the owner-manager, collective culture with family notion, close interpersonal relationships and a reward system, not only assists tacit knowledge sharing practices but motivates employees' sharing motivations. Sense of trust and confidence are the autonomous or controlled motivations to motivate skilled employees to share tacit knowledge depending on the sharing situations or groups of people. On the other side, the reasons for employees' knowledge hiding mainly reflect on the issues in differential management between family and nonfamily members, for example, the owner-manager's favourism towards her family members, lack

of a bonus and the '996' working schedule for nonfamily employees. The issues either directly increase non-family members' motivation to hide or indirectly reduce their motivation to share. Outstandingly, all family members stated nothing makes them hide knowledge in the workplace, because they share knowledge and work together in order to better achieve the common goals of family and business.

5. Contribution and Implication

This study has made three theoretical contribution to the knowledge sharing literature within small family firm context and Chinese context. First, it contributes to address a gap in the literature, which is studying knowledge sharing and hiding at the same time in the context of small family firm, and found that they are not the mutually opposite behaviours. Besides, the qualitative research methods contributes to study this area, because extent researchers mostly applied the quantitative methods. Second, this study uses the different types of motivations in SDT to explore tacit knowledge sharing, other than simply adopting the concepts of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. In particular, sense of trust and confidence could be considered as either autonomous motivation or controlled motivation for knowledge sharing dependent on the sharing situations or groups of people. Third, it enriches the Chinese literature of knowledge sharing field. There is a novel finding in terms of the '996' working schedule in the research, meaning working 6 days per week and the working hours from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm each day. This is a major reason for knowledge hiding in the case company, in line with the time pressure from the prior research.

This study can also facilitate owner-managers in the small family business to realise the importance of tacit knowledge sharing and hiding. Therefore, the owner-managers in small family business can take a series of effective long-term actions (e.g., building an organisational culture) and short-term measures (e.g., offering incentives to nonfamily employees; improving working hours) to encourage skilled employee's knowledge sharing, and mitigate the impact of unfairness between family and nonfamily employees on knowledge hiding at the same time.

6. References

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