

# **How Hierarchical Positions Affect Employees' Knowledge Sharing Behaviors? An Exploratory Study**

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*This paper explores the differences in employees' knowledge sharing behaviors when interacting with targets from different hierarchical positions in an organization. Eleven mid-level employees working in small and medium-sized enterprises in Hong Kong were interviewed for the exploratory purpose. The interview corpus, which consisted of 30,000 words, showed how and why mid-level employees differ in their knowledge sharing with different target audiences: their superiors, peers and subordinates. Theoretically, the findings advance our understanding of employees' decisions on knowledge sharing behavior; and, in practical terms, the findings inform managers about how employees' behavior is affected by hierarchical relationships in the workplace.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This is an exploratory study which examines employees' knowledge-sharing behaviors within organizations. Knowledge sharing (KS), defined as the articulation and learning of know-what and know-how for performing tasks among organizational members, has long been recognized by both scholars and human resource professionals as the key to enhancing organizational performance and competitive advantage in today's knowledge-based economies (Nickerson & Zenger, 2004; Zollo & Winter, 2002). However, managing employees' KS behaviors is far more complicated than merely providing an information system for employees' access. Research shows that, employees may still choose to hide what they know despite well-designed knowledge management (KM) system being in place (He, 2013). Moreover, hierarchical level has been a major influence over the choice of communication methods (Garicano & Wu, 2012). Therefore, employees' KS behaviors are influenced by social and individual factors within workplaces.

The extant literature, however, is inadequate for capturing such complexity in analyzing employees' KS behaviors because most relevant studies have been prescriptive in nature, specifying what employees *should* do based on objectified factors rather than examining how employees *would* do when sharing knowledge. For example, it is commonly accepted that a personalized style is to be adopted in sharing tacit knowledge, while explicit knowledge is better transmitted by a codified process (Hansen, Nohria & Tierney, 1999; Murray & Peyrefitte, 2007). Nevertheless, scholars of organization studies (OS) and KM

have argued that employees may not always act in the interest of the organization (Harrell & Harrison, 1998; Pfeffer, 1981) – that is, they may not choose the most efficient and effective way to conduct KS.

The current study aims to advance on previous research by examining how hierarchal and social factors affect the KS behaviors of mid-level employees in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong (HK). This research question departs from previous prescriptive studies by examining how contextual factors, such as organizational hierarchy, affect KS. Based on the findings of Garicano and Wu (2012) and Kuo and Young (2008), it is speculated that employees would behave differently when sharing knowledge with subordinates, peers, and superiors. Mid-level employees are thus the ideal targets for this study, given their need to interact with colleagues from the three different hierarchal levels. Also, SMEs in HK have been chosen for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, past studies have focused mainly on large organizations located in the West without examining the management of KS in other contexts, such as the SMEs and organizations in the East (Durst & Evarsson, 2012; Massaro, Handley, Bagnoli & Dunmay 2016; Wilkesman, Fischer & Wilkesmann, 2009). In practical terms, it is convenient for the authors to collect information in HK as they both work in the city. Also, HK, as one of the most developed economies in the Asia Pacific region, incorporate a large number of knowledge-intensive SMEs.

In this research, data obtained through interviews with 11 mid-level employees working in local knowledge-intensive SMEs were analyzed to examine how they shared or learned about knowledge in different settings and, more importantly, identify why they decided to do so. From the interview corpus consisting over 30,000 words, the major factors affecting the interviewees' KS behaviors were identified and a theoretical framework was created to demonstrate how different factors — such as “social norms”, “social relationship”, “hierarchal position”, and “efficiency” dominate employees' KS decisions.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, the existing literature on the predominant factors affecting the KS behaviors of employees is examined. Second, the methodology of and findings from the empirical study are presented. Finally, the shortcomings of the study are acknowledged and ideas worthy of further investigation are suggested.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the typology of Hansen et al. (1999), employees may choose to communicate either directly (personalization) or indirectly (codification) during the KS process. Traditionally, researchers have focused largely on the characteristics of knowledge as the major determinant of employees' choice of KS behaviors. For example, studies by Gupta and Govindarajan (2000) and Murray and Peyrefitte (2007) suggest that employees should adopt a personalized, direct style when sharing more tacit knowledge compared with sharing more explicit knowledge for which employees may choose to use codified documents as the means of sharing. However, these findings do not predict actual KS behaviour by employees as research has found that the pursuit of self-interests by employees is often in conflict with the pursuit of organizational interests (Harrell & Harrison, 1998; Ouchi, 1980). It thus follows that prescribing how employees *should* share their knowledge does not represent how employees *would* actually act in KS situations.

In particular, organization theorists suggest that the behaviours of employees are greatly affected by the power relationships within the organization (Pfeffer, 1981; Scott, 2001). In this respect, Willem and Scarbrough (2006) found that power relations and politicking behaviours, which were manifested in the instrumental form of social capital, influenced the employees to engage in a highly selective form of KS.

Among other factors, organizational hierarchy is the most prominent manifestation of power relationships in organizations. The organizational communication literature argues that organizational relationships are embedded in different power relationships and the power relationships affect the communication behaviours adopted by workers (Myers, Knox, Pawlowski & Ropog, 1999). Specifically, Fritz and Dillard (1994) found that communicating and sharing with different colleagues within an organization (e.g. superiors, fellow colleagues and subordinates) had an effect on the degree of honesty, self-disclosure, irreplaceability, and mutual dependence displayed. It can therefore be predicted that

employees' choice of communication behaviours would differ when they share knowledge with superiors, co-workers and subordinates (see, for example, Garicano & Wu, 2012).

Power relationships may also be manifested in the nature of the employees' tasks. For example, Teng and Song (2011) propose that whether a practice such as KS is solicited or voluntary involves the exercise of power relationships and power exchanges. They demonstrated the different nature and implications of solicited and voluntary KS for workers by specifying different organizational antecedents and thus called for more research to differentiate the two types of KS. In a similar vein, Kuo and Young (2008) found that employees' attitudes towards controllability of KS had a significant impact on their intentions and actual behaviour in KS.

In addition to power relationships, employees' KS behaviors may also be affected by culture and geography-specific factors. For example, Hutchings and Michailova (2004) and Huang, Davison and Gu (2008) discussed the importance of "guanxi" and "face" in KS among Chinese employees. Also, Voelpel and Han (2005), in their study on Siemens' ShareNet, found that the practice of distinguishing between in-group and out-group KS activities (i.e. the guanxi network) and "face-saving" behaviors were not limited to face-to-face communication but extended to indirect online sharing.

Nevertheless, except for the characteristic of knowledge, studies on all the other factors have remained scarce in the existing literature. Scholars and managers are not well informed, for example, on how employees' KS behaviors or reactions would differ when they are engaging in solicited KS vs voluntary KS, horizontal KS vs vertical KS, and in-group KS vs out-group KS. The current study aims to explore what considerations employees take into account when engaging in different types of KS with colleagues from different hierarchal levels, and how these considerations can be used to explain employees' preferred KS behaviors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper explores the differences in the behaviors of employees when sharing knowledge with targets from different hierarchal positions in an organization. The empirical basis is founded on a series of semi-structured interviews with 11 mid-level employees working in knowledge-intensive SMEs in HK. Mid-level employees were chosen as the key informants in this research because they have the most opportunities to engage in KS with colleagues from different hierarchal levels. Also, mid-level employees are often crucial in the knowledge base of a firm as their experience and social connections can be useful for obtaining new markets or expert information (Adama, 2016). The study is based on SMEs in HK for two reasons. First, KM in SMEs is often neglected by researchers and SME managers normally do not have as much awareness and resources for KM compared with large or multi-national companies (uit Beijerse, 2000). Thus, our understanding of the KM practices in SMEs stems mostly from a "large organization" perspective, which normally overlooks the particularities of managing KM behaviors in SMEs. In addition, past KM and KS research has been conducted mainly in the West and such findings may not be applicable to organizations in the East (Wilkesmann, et al., 2009). Therefore, by basing the study on SMEs in HK, it is not only possible to analyze employees' KS behaviors in different contexts but also generate alternate insights in the KM field. Also, as noted earlier, it is convenient for the authors to gain access to interviews as they are both working in HK.

A grounded theory approach was employed in the present study as there are no prior findings for setting hypotheses, and the research question involves complex interactions of human and social phenomena (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Convenience sampling, rather than strict theoretical or representative sampling techniques, was used, given the exploratory nature of the study. Convenience sampling is not an uncommon method for studying organizational phenomena in hypercompetitive places like HK, as "the high pressure environment does not typically permit the sort of access sought through random sampling, especially where the research involves interviewing" (Kamoche, 2006, p. 32). Despite the convenience sampling, criteria were set in selecting and inviting target interviewees. The first criterion was the knowledge-intensive nature of the SME's business. The general definition of knowledge-intensive firms is that the major production function of the firm relies on human expertise and

information (Alvesson, 1993). SMEs operating in a variety of industries were approached in an attempt to increase the number and variety of the sample as far as practically possible. Invitation emails and follow-up calls were sent to over 30 SMEs. The research objective and the choice of target interviewees (mid-level employees) were explained in the invitation email. Eleven SMEs eventually accepted our invitation to interview one of their mid-level employees, i.e. one interviewee from each SME. These 11 interviews comprised our study data.

The interviews were conducted during the period August 2014 to December 2015. The SMEs studied were engaged in five different business fields: non-governmental organizations (NGOs), banking and finance, real estate, public relations and information technology. The mid-level employees interviewed were mostly working as supervisors overseeing three to five frontline subordinates and reporting to the figurehead of the SME. As in Yang's (2007) observation, the interviewees played three significant roles in their respective companies – as innovator, mentors and facilitators – all of which required them to participate frequently in both voluntary and solicited sharing of work-related knowledge. Table 1 lists the fields and job titles of our interviewees.

**TABLE 1**  
**BACKGROUNDS OF THE 11 INTERVIEWEES AND THEIR RESPECTIVE SME**

<b>SME</b>	<b>Business Field</b>	<b>Job Title</b>
1	Public Relations	Senior Officer
2		Consultant
3	NGO	Project Officer
4		Executive Secretary
5		Project Coordinator
6	Banking and Finance	Human Resource Manager
7		Insurance Agency Manager
8		Actuarial Officer
9		Relationship Manager
10	Real Estate	Assistant Supervisor, Sales
11		Leasing Manager

The interviewees were asked a series of open-ended questions about the type of communication behavior they adopted in different circumstances of KS, as well as the underlying rationale. Ample time was given to allow interviewees to give full accounts of their own perceptions and views. The process was guided by a written interview protocol, which could be revised after each interview once the emerging themes of the research had taken a much clearer shape (Riley, 1996; Yin, 2014). The protocol was applied flexibly so that the flow of interviews responded to the interviewee's train of thought. Also, subsequent interventions took the form of prompts and probes based on the responses of the interviewees. Overall, the interview questions were designed to encourage the interviewees to 'volunteer' information. The interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and were conducted in the mother language of the interviewees (Cantonese) to avoid possible language barriers. All the interviews were tape-recorded and supplemented with field notes. They were subsequently transcribed and translated for content analysis, with a total of more than 700 minutes of recordings and over 30,000 English words in the corpus.

The analysis process followed the logic of abduction and was characterized by open coding (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). We searched for interviewees' descriptions of their KS behaviors in different scenarios and tried to identify why they behaved in the ways they did. In sum, the analysis focused on (1) the interviewee's choice of behaviors in different scenarios of KS (a more objective description of KS behaviors) and (2) the underlying reasons for their choice of behaviors (a more subjective and contextual explanation).

## FINDINGS

The categories of the major differences in the interviewees' choices of behaviors when they were conducting KS with colleagues in different hierarchal relationships are shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2**  
**DIFFERENCE IN INTERVIEWEES' KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIORS**

<b>Target of Knowledge Sharing</b>	<b>Type of Communication</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Superiors	Indirect	Asymmetrical relationship to show respect and obedience to social norms
Peers	Indirect/Codification	Social relationship: friends or passerby
Subordinates	Direct/Personalization	Efficiency/respect

It can be seen that the interviewees' choice of behavior differs when they are engaging in KS with superiors, peers and subordinates. Different considerations underpin these variations in their KS behaviors. In KS with superiors, the social norms of showing respect and obedience seem to be an important, or even predominant, factor in their decisions on how to behave. They tend to act more formally and carefully on such occasions; and they prepare themselves better (e.g. having relevant documentation ready or typing a procedural manual) and make appointments (mostly via email) before they meet their superiors. In other words, they tend to communicate with their superiors in a more indirect manner via some kind of well-prepared documents. Disrespectful or ignorant behavior is deliberately avoided to prevent leaving a bad impression on their superiors. Interestingly, even though the interviewees are all mindful of such tendencies during the interview, they did not explain much about the rationale behind them, especially when such implicitness is compared with their colorful explanations on making KS decisions with their subordinates. When the explanation of such behavior was prompted, they usually responded by saying "You have to respect your superiors" or "some bosses are more old-fashioned, so they would like to be respected". One interviewee said:

"Of course I will be a bit more nervous when I am talking with my superior. It's a must. I might think more clearly and further before presenting to him. If I am talking with my peers or subordinates, I might not be as well prepared."

Senior Officer, Public relations

Respect for seniors seems to be embedded in the minds of the mid-level employees, which is surprisingly similar to the traditional Chinese culture where organizational hierarchy is prevalent and juniors must show their respect to their seniors. Although the interviewees might have received Westernized education, such a social norm seems to be prevalent in their workplaces and, even if one does not believe in such values, they might still be forced to comply to give a better impression of themselves or have a greater chance of promotion in the company.

The interviewees adopt a completely different approach when they are sharing knowledge with their subordinates. In this case, they usually encourage effective and expeditious communication. They usually prefer their subordinates to "drop in" and ask questions about their work, instead of having a formalized KS regime that involves invitations or codified approaches. Unlike what they do with their superiors, most of the interviewees do not expect or require respect and strict obedience from their subordinates because they recognize the change in social norms in the younger generation, despite some of the interviewees complaining about their younger subordinates being too casual and disrespectful to them. Nevertheless, the interviewees in general found it more effective to share knowledge in a direct, less formal way with their subordinates, as mid-level employees are often expected to act as line managers

who are responsible not only for their own performance but also of their subordinates. It is therefore crucial for them to share knowledge with their subordinates efficiently to allow them to perform and pick up their work more quickly. As a result, a liberal and free KS atmosphere is deliberately created to enhance KS efficiency. Most of the interviewees believe that, as a “boss” to their subordinates, they are expected to “set the tone”, i.e. subordinates will follow their choice of KS behaviors. If they invite open communication, their subordinates will be open and direct in KS, and vice versa. “Boss setting the tone”, according to our interviewees, is a major social norm that they should observe in their workplaces. As one of the interviewees noted:

“I think when communicating with subordinates, it’s important to put myself in their shoes... if you think you’re high up there all the time, it’s not good for the development of the team. I actually prefer blending in with them.”

Project officer, NGO

Therefore, we can attribute the interviewees’ choices of KS behaviors to the consideration of social norms when they are engaging in vertical KS (i.e. with their superiors and their subordinates). The impact of social norms on their horizontal KS (i.e. with peers), however, seems to be minimal. Instead, personal relationships with the target of sharing appear to be one of the key determinants of KS behaviors. Most of the interviewees stated that they are willing to share knowledge with peers, but mostly limited to close acquaintances because they believe this will prevent them from being taken advantage of. Moreover, they mostly adopt an informal and direct style, such as chatting during lunch or encounters in the pantry. In contrast, the interviewees admitted that they would usually avoid sharing knowledge with peers with whom they are not familiar; and, even if they are asked or forced to do so, they would be very careful in the process, for example:

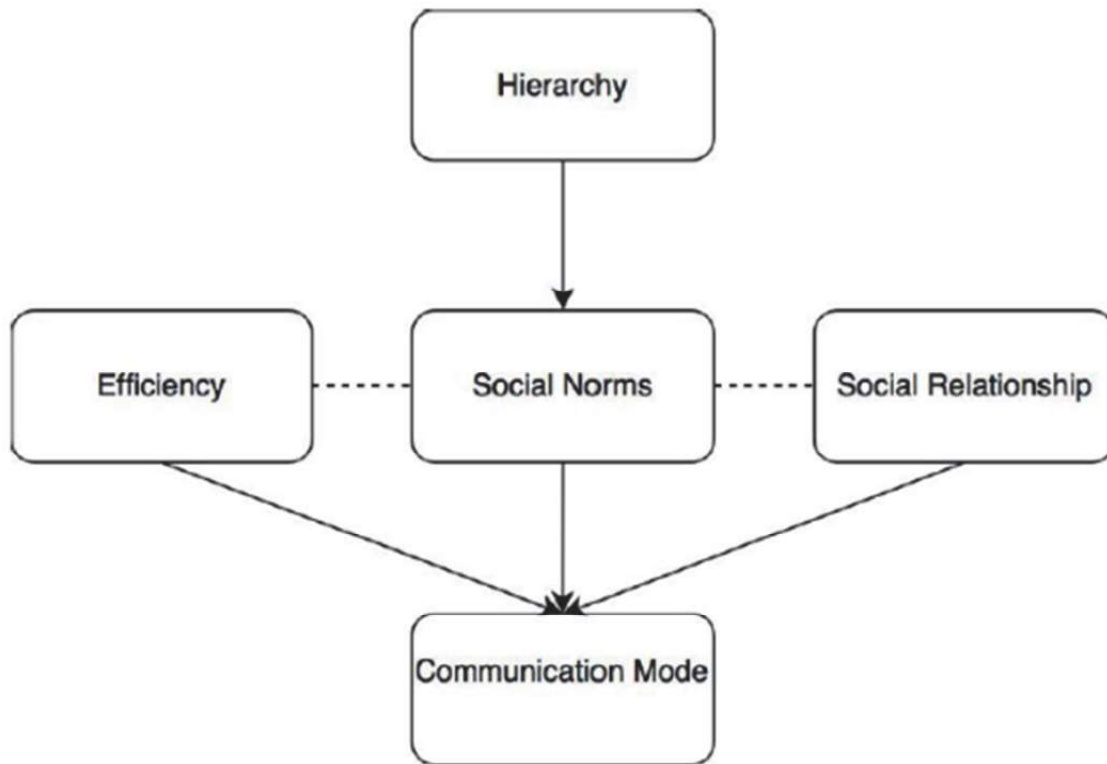
“To prevent misunderstandings, we will send out emails, just as a record. When some situations arise, you know, we can see who is responsible for the incidence or how it did go.”

Human resources manager, Banking and finance

Another important observation is that the interviewees tend to be rather conservative in formal sharing sessions, such as weekly or monthly meetings. Such avoidance is in stark contrast to how they deal with their subordinates or close peers. Yet, the hoarding of knowledge to gain power or monetary incentives seems not to be the major reason for their withholding. Instead, being too active to share knowledge, according to the interviewees, makes them seem like “know-it-alls” or people who are flashy and like to show off. Hence, remaining silence can sometimes “save face” with their co-workers and such behavior is important for maintaining a humble façade of themselves. Therefore, if they decide to remain quiet in KS opportunities, it is not about capturing benefits from the knowledge receiver. Instead, the decision to withhold information derives from the norm of being humble and not standing out from the rest of their peers.

Figure 1 below depicts how the mid-level employees from SMEs in HK made their knowledge sharing decisions in the corporate hierarchy. There is no single rule which dictates how the interviewees choose their KS behaviors. Instead, they look at the network of relationships they are involved in and utilize different sharing and communication strategies accordingly. From this study, a decision model can be drafted to explain how our interviewees would choose their desired mode of KS.

**FIGURE 1**  
**A DECISION MODEL OF EMPLOYEES' CHOICE OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIORS**



The position of the target of KS in the organizational hierarchy is a major issue to be considered by our interviewees. They would first look at whether their target is their superior, peer or subordinate. KS with superiors is governed by respect and social norms and characterized by a risk-avoidant mentality. In these circumstances, our interviewees generally prefer codified forms of sharing (e.g. by emails or documents) and their attitude tend to be careful and mannered, despite the possible inefficiency and delays. On the other hand, when they are sharing knowledge with their subordinates they prefer efficiency rather than formality and encourage personalized, verbal ways of KS. The fact that they would attempt to create an open atmosphere and encourage efficient KS, can be attributed to how traditional Chinese norms enforce organizational hierarchy by their interaction with potential promotion opportunities. For example, the interviewees choose to be formal with their superiors even if it is not the best option for KS as they believe that politeness and formality give them a better chance of promotion due to the better impression they present to their superiors. Being an effective knowledge sender might not be the most important factor. On the contrary, efficient KS is essential to make their subordinates work effectively and an open and efficient KS channel is able to increase the efficiency of the entire team. This consequently provides the interviewees with better chances of promotion as they are usually responsible for guiding junior staff members. Therefore, career incentives, organizational hierarchy and social norms seem to be interplaying factors governing the behaviors of the interviewees in vertical KS (i.e. with superiors and with subordinates).

When KS is conducted with peers, social relationships become the prior consideration for the interviewees. Power or status is not their primary concern in making sharing decision in contrary to previous findings (Heizmann, 2011; Willem & Scarbrough, 2006). They are generally happy to share knowledge with peers they are friendly with, especially through informal KS opportunities. However,

they are unwilling to share with peers with whom they do not have a close relationship, especially in formal meetings, because they think this would damage their reputation in the company – being considered a show-off to others is often unwelcomed by organizational members. Such findings might stem from the proposition of humility and harmony in Chinese societies. Those who have power but are arrogant might not be welcomed by both their peers and their superiors; instead, those who are humble and sociable are preferred for promotion. Given these findings, the importance of social relationships for mid-level employees in a firm might be rooted, as in the case of respecting social norms, in the career incentives such adherence brings. Nonetheless, all these findings show the culture- and locale-specific nature of KS behavior when situated in hierarchal contexts.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Overall, the current research indicates that hierarchal position, social relationships and social norms are all critical factors affecting the KS behaviors of mid-level employees in SMEs in HK. KS behavior differs significantly when employees are interacting with targets from different hierarchal levels. The differences in behaviors can be attributed to their wish to gain either social or career benefits in norm-conforming acts. The choice of KS behaviors is therefore a highly contextualized decision and changes according to different situations. Such observations advance beyond past prescriptive studies from specifying and assuming how employees *should* share knowledge to truly understanding and predicting how they *would* share knowledge.

One of the more interesting findings in this study is that, despite encouragement by their superiors, many of our interviewees are still reluctant to share their knowledge with peers in formal KS events in their organization. Such a clear distinction between in-group and out-group colleagues has also been demonstrated in other studies (Wilkesmann, et al., 2009). An issue worthy of investigation by academics would be the value to Chinese workers of social relationships within an organization. However, this does not preclude other factors affecting KS behaviors. As mentioned in the introduction, human communication is affected by a multitude of factors and their interplay. The interplay between organizational hierarchy, social norms and personal relationships in influencing employees' choice of KS behaviors has significant theoretical and practical significance for both academia and the business sector.

As in any other study, the current study has its limitations. Since all the interviewees are based in HK, the social and cultural background in the area may not accurately depict what happens in other Chinese regions such as mainland China or Taiwan. However, societies in the Greater China region in principle share many similarities in terms of social hierarchy and norms. The authors are therefore confident that similar results could be replicated in studies conducted in other Chinese-dominant cultures. Future research is encouraged to examine other regions in the East, in addition to Chinese societies. Also, the sample size of the interviewees was very limited, and the findings in this study can only be treated as exploratory in nature, instead of claiming universal generalization. Future research may repeat our study with larger sample sizes in different Eastern societies.

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