

Measuring Tacit Knowledge Hiding in IT Consulting Firms

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Abstract—Organizations like Information Technology (IT) consulting firms use knowledge as one of their core competencies to gain a competitive edge in the market. These firms rely on the tacit knowledge of their employees to gain a competitive edge in the industry. These highly competitive work environments lend themselves to individuals hiding knowledge from each other for a myriad of reasons, including helping individuals maintain a competitive edge within the firm. Knowledge Hiding (KH), the deliberate hiding of knowledge when asked, has negative effects on organizations. This research explores if tacit knowledge is being deliberately hidden from others when prompted due to this highly competitive work environment. Using social exchange theory and an experimental design method, this research proposes to ask individuals working in the IT consulting sector if they would hide different types of knowledge (tacit vs. explicit) given the competitiveness of the work environment. This research also proposes testing different mediating effects like task interdependence and professional commitment to reduce tacit knowledge hiding in IT consulting firms.

Keywords-tacit knowledge; knowledge hiding; competitive work environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this research comes from working in a highly competitive work environment in the field of Information Technology (IT) consulting. A core competency of consulting companies is the tacit knowledge (i.e., skills, ideas, and experiences that are hard to codify) and explicit knowledge (i.e., information that is easy to share, document, and understand) gained and created by working with multiple clients over multiple industries and documenting best practices, common pitfalls, and lessons learned. IT consulting companies also create a highly competitive work environment where employees compete against each other for promotions and merit increases. The highly competitive work environment fosters team productivity and organizational gains but results in employees hiding knowledge from each other to maintain a competitive edge for themselves. Literature has shown that the organization is negatively impacted when employees hide knowledge from each other. Scant research exists examining tacit knowledge hiding in highly competitive work environments. Based on a literature search, there appears only one article that examines tacit and explicit KH in a highly competitive work environment, specifically in the field of academics [1]. Presumably, the field of academics has a different promotion and tenure process than the private sector and may lead to

different degrees of hiding tacit knowledge. Hence, studying other highly competitive work environments (e.g., IT consulting) is important. This leads to the following research questions. 1) Is tacit knowledge hidden more than explicit knowledge in these environments? and, 2) Are there ways to encourage employees not to hide tacit knowledge from each other while maintaining the organization's competitive environment?

There are both practical and theoretical contributions to this research. Findings from this research can help fill the gap in tacit knowledge hiding in a competitive work environment. Finding ways to ameliorate the negative effects of tacit knowledge hiding can help organizations that foster a competitive work environment.

Relevant literature on knowledge hiding, tacit vs. explicit knowledge, and highly competitive work environments are discussed in Section II. Section III provides a proposed methodology that examines tacit knowledge hiding for workers in a highly competitive working environment. Next steps and future work are discussed in Section IV.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Hiding (KH) is defined as “an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person” [2, p 65]. KH is unique given that a knowledge seeker (i.e., an individual seeking knowledge) must request knowledge from another individual, and that individual must intentionally hide knowledge, thus being referred to as the knowledge hider. KH is a unique construct that is different from other types of knowledge-related behaviors, such as knowledge sharing or knowledge hoarding. KH can take place at the individual level, the team level, and the organizational level. According to [2], KH consists of three dimensions: playing dumb (the knowledge hider pretends not to know the knowledge that is being requested), rationalized hiding (the knowledge hider provides reasons for not revealing the knowledge), and evasive hiding (the knowledge hider offers wrong or incomplete information).

A competitive work environment, like most IT consulting firms, is a workplace culture where employees are motivated to outperform their peers, often driven by the desire to secure rewards and recognition [3]. Competitive environments often foster a climate where employees are more likely to engage in knowledge hiding to protect their own interests and maintain a competitive edge. A competitive psychological climate can exacerbate

knowledge hiding, as employees may feel threatened and resort to self-protective behaviors [4]. This is particularly evident in performance-oriented climates where employees' actions are compared against their peers [5].

Tacit knowledge refers to knowledge that is difficult to communicate or convey in words. It is often gained through personal experience, context, and practice, making it inherently subjective and context-specific. Conversely, explicit knowledge can be easily communicated, documented, and shared. Research has shown that tacit knowledge can enhance firm performance, particularly in consulting firms where individual expertise and insights are crucial. Consulting firms can leverage tacit knowledge to improve decision-making, foster collaboration, and drive innovation, ultimately leading to better client outcomes and competitive advantage [6].

Given the difficulty of documenting and sharing tacit knowledge, and given that tacit knowledge is crucial for the success of consulting firms, and consulting firms operate in a highly competitive environment where knowledge hiding is heightened, is tacit knowledge hiding more prevalent than explicit knowledge hiding in a competitive work environment? If so, are there ways for consulting firms to overcome hiding this valuable tacit knowledge?

III. METHODS

The nature of the construct makes it hard to measure since KH involves specifically asking for information from an individual and not receiving it. Much of the research in this area involves using a survey instrument. A few studies use semi-structured interviews or an experimental design [7].

In this research, the researchers propose using a 2 x 2 experimental design to ask the participants (i.e., potential knowledge hidings) working in IT consulting to share either tacit or explicit knowledge in a competitive or non-competitive work environment. The researchers will manipulate the types of knowledge and the competitiveness of the environment and then ask the participants to score their willingness to share that knowledge with the requestor (i.e., knowledge seeker). An experiment, compared to a survey, could decrease the reluctance to admit to knowledge hiding since the scenarios are fictitious, and they are not asking what the participants have done in the past.

The researchers will use existing measurements of tacit and explicit knowledge [8] and competitive work environments [2] to guide the development of scenarios for the experiment. For example, one scenario would prime the participant into a competitive work environment by stating that promotions at this company are based on high expectations of individual success, and those not promoted to the next level will be coached to find another company that is a better fit. A pilot study will be used to verify that the scenarios meet face validity and are reliable before circulating the instrument to a larger sample of IT

consulting professionals. IT professionals will be recruited through existing contacts at IT consulting firms like Accenture, E&Y, KMPG, and Slalom Consulting.

In this same research stream, the researchers would like to understand what the organization can do to reduce the hiding of valuable tacit knowledge. Reference [1] examined tacit and explicit knowledge hiding in academia, which is also considered a competitive work environment. They found that task interdependence and social support moderated explicit KH, but not tacit KH. This research aims to investigate whether this also holds true in IT consulting, where tacit knowledge may be more beneficial to the organization compared to an academic setting. This manipulation can be a part of the original experiment based on the participants' dependent variable response (i.e., willingness to share).

IV. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This research aims to study valuable tacit knowledge using social exchange theory in IT consulting firms to 1) determine that it is indeed being hidden and 2) verify if researched antecedents work in this context using an experimental design. The results from this research could help expose the estimated extent of tacit knowledge hiding in IT consulting firms. Depending on the results of this research, the findings could also assist managers in IT consulting firms in finding ways to reduce the tacit knowledge hiding problem.

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