

*Sathya Narayanan SIVAPRAKASAM, Manikandan VELRAJAN*

### **3.2. KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOUR – IMPACTS OF TRUST CLIMATE AND ATTACHMENT TO KNOWLEDGE**

#### **Summary**

Knowledge sharing is considered vital for the success of the organisations as the knowledge driven economy demands knowledge specific asset building rather than physical asset building). In this study, the role of trust environment, the perceived benefits, Expected reciprocation and the sense of attachment to knowledge affecting the knowledge sharing behaviour of employees in Knowledge centric organisations are assessed. A structural model fit of the variables involved in the study revealed that expected reciprocation and a trust based environment is positively affecting the knowledge sharing behaviour. Attachment to knowledge will strongly hinder the knowledge sharing initiatives whereas perceived benefits will not have any direct impact on knowledge sharing. This study suggests that Organisations can not encourage knowledge sharing amongst its employees by merely providing incentives and benefits. It requires a trust based environment which can strongly encourage knowledge sharing and simultaneously mitigate the employee's attachment to knowledge (perceived loss of knowledge power) which emerged as a strong detractor of knowledge sharing behaviour.

**Keywords:** knowledge sharing, knowledge attachment, trust

#### **Introduction**

Knowledge is considered to be a source of competitive advantage (Chennamaneni, 2006) and it represents rare, inimitable and non-substitutable assets (Liebeskind, 1996). With the purpose of improving the efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness Organisations build its ability to acquire, organise and diffuse knowledge through its knowledge management initiatives. Knowledge sharing is considered to be the key enabler of knowledge management (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). Jackson et al (2006) argue that primary means through which employee can contribute to application of knowledge, innovation and finally competitive advantage to an organisation is through knowledge sharing.

Although knowledge sharing is recognised as one among the important factors which facilitate the survival of the organisation, the factors which encourage or discourage knowledge sharing behaviour in organisations are not well understood (Bock et al, 2005). To date several authors have studied the antecedents to knowledge sharing including organisational factors like a culture of trust and innovation, management and supervisor support, rewards and incentives, team characteristics etc. and individual factors like attitude, ownership of knowledge, reciprocation, etc. (Wang and Noe, 2010). Uniqueness in knowledge will be a source of power and personal gains in terms of cash bonuses and promotion (Husted and Michailova, 2002). This power source may act as a deterrent to knowledge sharing because employees fear losing their distinctiveness. Only a few studies have been made on the impact of power on knowledge sharing (Liao, 2008; Renzl, 2008).

Perceived loss of knowledge power is considered to be a detractor of knowledge sharing (Chennamaneni, 2006) whereas perceived benefits, Reciprocation and trust climate is considered to be a facilitator of knowledge sharing as identified in the earlier studies (Wang and Noe, 2010). The role of the afore-mentioned factors is not assessed through a Structural Equation Model which will be the unique contribution of the study. No documented research has studied the role of trust climate as an antecedent to the knowledge sharing behaviour with the perceived benefits and the perceived loss of knowledge power as mediators. This is warranted because trust plays a major role in balancing a psychological contract between employers and employees and it has the potential to provide employee satisfaction and commitment (Atkinson, 2007). The ability of trust as an antecedent in reducing the perceived loss of knowledge power and increasing the perceived benefits before having a positive impact on knowledge sharing has to be tested.

### **Hypotheses Development**

Trust as an antecedent: In the knowledge sharing context, trust is considered to be very effective in reducing the perceived costs of knowledge sharing (Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei, 2005). Equally, trust is considered to be an important antecedent to knowledge sharing (Butler et al., 1999; Chowdhury, 2005). This premise leads to the hypothesis on the antecedent role of trust on the knowledge sharing behaviour of employees.

*H1. Trust climate has a significant positive impact on the knowledge sharing behaviour of employees.*

Mayer and Gavin (2005) proposes through their study on the need to investigate the mechanism through which the trust has an impact on the knowledge sharing. Therefore, measuring the direct and indirect effects of trust on knowledge sharing carries significance. Renzl (2008) proposes that trust can facilitate knowledge sharing by reducing the perceived loss of unique value by holding on to the power. This is measured as perceived loss of knowledge power (Grey, 2001). This sense of holding on to knowledge as a source of power and fearing to lose that power leads to knowledge attachment which could act detrimental to knowledge sharing. This premise leads to the second and third hypotheses.

*H2. Trust climate significantly reduces the sense of attachment to knowledge*

*H3. Attachment to knowledge will significantly reduce the knowledge sharing behaviour*

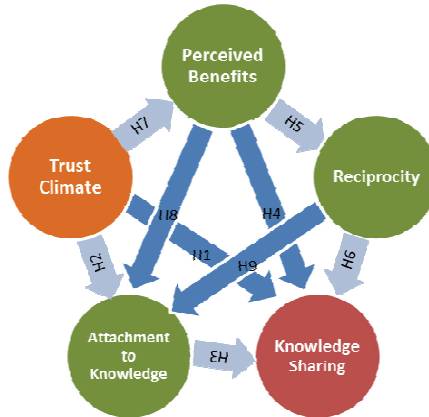
Knowledge sharing by individuals is evaluated based on the perceived ratio of benefits to costs and their knowledge sharing decisions are based on perceived respect, reputation and incentives. This leads to the following hypotheses. The norm of reciprocity refers to the expectations that knowledge sharing should be mutual and considered fair by both the sharing and receiving parties. Prior studies suggest that individuals share knowledge with an expectation that the others will oblige to the individual's future knowledge requests (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Bock et al., 2005). No relevant studies have identified the impact of the perceived benefits on the reciprocity. It can be hypothesised that the higher the perceived extrinsic benefits from knowledge sharing, higher the reciprocal expectations for fair exchange of knowledge between two parties.

*H4: Perceived benefits (measured in terms of perceived reputation and incentives) have a profound positive impact on the knowledge sharing behaviour.*

*H5: Perceived benefits of knowledge sharing positively influences the expected knowledge reciprocity*

*H6: Knowledge Reciprocity significantly increases the knowledge sharing behaviour.*

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework**



Beyond these the role of trust climate and its impact on the perceived benefits also need to get assessed because employees may expect benefits from knowledge sharing aided by a climate of trust. Moreover, the perceived benefits may reduce the sense of attachment to the knowledge because the incentives and reputation associated with knowledge sharing will encourage the individuals to give up their knowledge. Meanwhile, the reciprocity associated with knowledge sharing may increase the sense of attachment to knowledge because expectations to share knowledge are influenced by other’s intentions to reciprocate. This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H7: The trust climate has a significant positive impact on the perceived benefits of knowledge sharing*

*H8: The perceived benefits of knowledge sharing will significantly reduce the attachment to knowledge*

*H9: The reciprocity will have a positive effect on the attachment to knowledge.*

Based on the above hypotheses, a conceptual framework (Figure 1) is developed so as to assess the model using structural equations.

The respondents for this study are representing knowledge workers who are predominantly from software development and Information Technology industry. As reaching a sample size of above 425 is considered robust to represent the population, a snowballing sampling procedure is followed but very much restricted to the knowledge industries.

**Results**

The Structural Equation analysis is carried out on the data using AMOS 21.0 through a two-stage approach. The measurement properties of the constructs are initially assessed before analysing the structural relationships between the constructs. Several



The perceived reciprocity in knowledge sharing has a strong positive relationship with knowledge sharing behaviour (H6 supported: as evident from the beta estimate with 0.221 and  $p < 0.01$ ). Quid pro quo expectations in knowledge sharing logically have a strong impact on the actual knowledge sharing behaviour. One of the strongest positive relationship is the impact of perceived benefits on reciprocity (H5 supported: with beta estimate 0.593 and  $p < 0.01$ ). This is quite logical in its explanation that extrinsic benefits encourage quid pro quo transactions in knowledge sharing.

*Table 1: Results of Structural Equation Analysis*

Hypotheses/ Relationship	Estimate	Significance	Sign	Support
H1- Trust Climate → Knowledge Sharing	0.256	**	+	Yes
H2- Trust Climate → Knowledge Attachment	-0.311	**	-	Yes
H3- Knowledge Attachment → Knowledge Sharing	-0.280	**	-	Yes
H4- Perceived Benefits → Knowledge Sharing	0.104	X		No
H5- Perceived Benefits → Reciprocity	0.593	**	+	Yes
H6- Reciprocity → Knowledge Sharing	0.221	**	+	Yes
H7- Trust Climate → Perceived Benefits	0.422	**	+	Yes
H8- Perceived Benefits → Knowledge Attachment	-0.031	X		No
H9- Reciprocity → Knowledge Attachment	0.190	*	+	Yes

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  \* $p < 0.05$  X-Not Significant

Further analysis reveals that trust climate has also a very strong impact on the perceived benefits from knowledge sharing (H7 supported: with beta estimate 0.422 and  $p < 0.01$ ). This is contextually revealing in its meaning because the increased trust levels can naturally enhance the perceived benefits from knowledge sharing. But the perceived benefits share no relationship with attachment to knowledge (H8 not supported: as evident from the beta estimate with -0.031 and  $p > 0.05$ ). This is also surprising because when individuals perceive to get benefits from knowledge sharing it is expected that the tendency to hoard the knowledge can come down significantly. This means that extrinsic benefits do not have the power to reduce the attachment to knowledge and it cannot be able to decrease the fear of power loss due to knowledge sharing. The role of reciprocity in determining the attachment to knowledge tendencies is also significant (H9 supported, but with a weaker impact with beta estimate 0.190 and  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

Supporting the views of Kankanhalli et al., (2005), this study reveals that the trust climate in the organisations play a key role in enhancing the knowledge sharing behaviours in organisations. Equally trust plays a major role in reducing the fear attached to the loss of knowledge power. The sense of attachment to knowledge can be a great impediment to knowledge sharing as Schepers and Van den Berg (2007) found out that individual competition in the work place hindering the knowledge sharing initiatives. Chennamaneni (2006) and Renzl (2008) in their studies established the negative role of fear of loss of knowledge power on the knowledge sharing behaviour.

This study also reinforces the high impeding power of attachment to knowledge on the knowledge sharing behaviours of individuals in organisations.

The quid pro quo expectation in knowledge sharing (reciprocity) can also encourage the attachment to knowledge. This in turn can prove detrimental for the knowledge sharing initiatives of the organisation. The presence of cooperative team perception can lead to enhanced knowledge sharing (Willem and Scarbrough, 2006). The significance of team cooperation is ratified in this study as the organisational trust climate is composed of both the organisation wide trust and team based trust. Organisations which want to reap a significant advantage from knowledge sharing should focus their energies in establishing organisation wide trust and equally on encouraging team level trusts. This is vital in increasing knowledge sharing behaviour and simultaneously reducing negative effects associated with knowledge attachment.

Although earlier studies have highlighted that the perceived benefits in terms of incentives have a profound impact on knowledge sharing (Beer and Nohria 2000), in professional level settings, the advantage of perceived benefits is overcome by the perceived usefulness to others by giving knowledge. This underscores the fact that in some settings perceived benefits may fail to encourage knowledge sharing. This study reflectively reveals the insignificant role of perceived benefits in encouraging knowledge sharing because it is carried out in a similar professional knowledge workers setting. One unique value addition from this study is that the perceived benefits cannot reduce the attachment to knowledge. This is surprising given the extrinsic role of benefits as a motivator. Individuals may not come forward to give up their knowledge power seeing the material benefits or reputation from knowledge sharing initiatives.

This further validates the previous findings that when organisations merely focus on giving benefits to encourage knowledge sharing, it may not likely happen. Unless the organisations invest in building a trust climate their knowledge sharing initiatives may miserably fail, even when it is backed up by a strong incentives, reputation or benefits scheme aiming at knowledge sharing.

The trust climate also will create a significant increase in perceived benefits expectation from knowledge sharing. This means that management can expect the employees' benefit expectations to go up naturally when they start facilitating a trust based climate. Therefore the organisations have to provide benefits to knowledge sharing as a hygiene factor. Although the perceived benefits may not play a major role directly in increasing the knowledge sharing tendencies, it does have a significant say on the reciprocal expectations in knowledge sharing. This is noteworthy because for encouraging knowledge sharing a well-designed benefit programme in terms of incentives and recognition may play an indirect role because such benefit programmes can develop strong reciprocal intentions among knowledge workers.

This study in concurrence with earlier studies re-iterates the role of reciprocity in enhancing knowledge sharing (Lerner and Triole, 2000; Kankanhalli, et al., 2005). Therefore, perceived benefits seem to have a strong indirect role in encouraging knowledge sharing by establishing the reciprocity expectations. This study's q value addition is that reciprocity expectation can also lead to increased attachment to knowledge. This means that reciprocity expectations can logically lead to a sense of

fear in losing the knowledge power on the one side (although on a smaller scale) which is considered detrimental and at the same time significantly increasing the knowledge sharing behaviour which is considered positive. Practitioners should emphasise care while they encourage reciprocity because it can increase both the knowledge sharing and knowledge attachment.

#### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study involves knowledge workers across various organisations. Although there is a consistency across the choice of the respondents they belong to various industries, proving external validity requires greater care in sampling from a single industry to emphasise homogeneity of samples. This work is purely quantitative in nature and is exposed to the inherent vulnerabilities of any quantitative research. Future qualitative studies should be carried out to triangulate these findings.

This study didn't consider any new variables and in a sense has repeated earlier studies with minor modifications to the relationships. In future, the role of conflicting intentions to knowledge sharing has to be tested as the individual's mind is not always consistently tuned towards knowledge sharing. This means that employees will go through a flux during which on some occasions feel encouraged to knowledge sharing and in some other occasions feel not to share knowledge. Such conflicting intentions and their impact on knowledge sharing behaviour need to be studied in the future.

#### **Conclusion**

Organisations while taking initiatives to encourage knowledge sharing behaviour has to facilitate a trust climate as a primary antecedent. While the trust can encourage knowledge sharing it can significantly allay down the fear of individual's loss of knowledge power. The organisations should also design incentives and recognition programme which can indirectly encourage knowledge sharing through creating necessary reciprocity platforms. The above measures will help organisations to encourage knowledge sharing and reducing the knowledge attachment tendencies.

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