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Business not as usual: Understanding the drivers of employees' tacit knowledge sharing behavior in a teleworking environment

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Abstract — In recent years, companies have differentiated themselves from their competitors through their intellectual capital, an essential resource for survival. However, despite the growing number of studies in understanding the transformation and impacts on firms resulting from the pandemic, the literature is still scarce on understanding tacit knowledge sharing behavior during the lockdown period. This study contributes to the existing literature exploring the organizational and individual factors that influence employee knowledge-sharing behavior and, consequently, strengthen a firm's intellectual capital while in teleworking mode.

Keywords - Teleworking; tacit knowledge; knowledge sharing; COVID-19; theory of planned behavior, organizational factors, individual factors.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last 20 years, innovations brought by information and communication technologies have enabled companies to migrate to remote work environments, also known as teleworking, in such a way that the physical location of the workplace is gradually losing importance [1]. Still, before the pandemic, only around 2% of employees were teleworking mainly from their homes in the European Union (EU) in 2017 [2].

However, a global crisis in almost every industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has swiftly caused far-reaching changes, such as the requirement for social distancing, sharply reducing population mobility, and increasing job insecurity levels.

Although some countries have managed the crisis better than others, allowing them to balance the restrictions within acceptable limits, firms were forced to adapt quickly, implementing teleworking practices, regardless of whether they were technologically, financially, or legally prepared for these changes. As such, the scenario has changed significantly: In the European Union, 48% of the employees worked from home at least part of the time in 2020[3], showing a considerable increase in teleworking due to the lockdown. The pandemic has made it the norm in the corporate world, changing how and where many of us work.

As vaccination rollouts progress, companies have yet to decide which working model they want to adopt going forward, which means this “freedom” may not be here permanently. After spending more than a year in this new reality, many

companies have opted for the hybrid model. In contrast, other factors still have a greater degree of uncertainty, such as what to do with the real estate they own: repurpose or downsize their physical footprint as employees go remote for at least part of the week? Given this scenario, many employees are facing challenges or barriers never experienced before, such as: requiring a reliable internet connection, a quiet place to work, remote collaboration, or managing informal conversations with their co-workers.

Regarding knowledge creation, firms differentiate themselves from competitors through their ability to adopt knowledge management (KM) practices [4]. However, tacit knowledge is highly personal, embedded in the human mind, and therefore difficult to articulate or disseminate within firms. Thus, the success rate of KM initiatives has remained low [5] before the pandemic, resulting in financial costs and negative impacts on organizational performance [4].

II. ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE CREATION AND SHARING

Knowledge is simply what individuals know or what they know how to do. Thus, the process by which knowledge transformation takes place is known as knowledge conversion. Nonaka and Takeuchi [6] conceptualized the continuous knowledge conversion process in their SECI model, representing the four stages in which it occurs.

SECI represents a spiraling process of sharing and reflection, composed of socialization (tacit knowledge sharing between individuals), externalization (to articulate tacit knowledge in explicit concepts), combination (to combine different explicit knowledge entities), and internalization (to embody explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge). After undergoing these stages, organizational knowledge is transformed into group or individual knowledge through internalization and socialization, while the opposite occurs through externalization and combination. Knowledge “becomes” or “amplifies,” and the process reaches a “new level,” hence the metaphor for a knowledge creation spiral. In this journey, employees enhance their capacity to engage in a situation or challenge in their organizations and apply their knowledge to act on or resolve the conundrum by interacting and sharing their knowledge.

Many in the KM community have widely accepted the SECI model, both in conception and application [7]. Although,

its validity has also been questioned, with claims that “new knowledge comes about not when the tacit becomes explicit, but when our skilled performance is punctuated in new ways through social interaction” [8].

Other authors [9] also emphasize the association of employees with knowledge creation, suggesting that deriving knowledge from information requires human judgment and is based on context and experience. Likewise, previous studies associate the relevance of the employee and her/his social interactions as the starting point for knowledge creation and innovative ideas [10], which means that knowledge is constantly changing and in a state of flux with human experience.

Knowledge creation and sharing can then be defined as a learning process in which there is propagation and assimilation of ideas and the factors that make employees willing to share knowledge play a crucial role in how successful KM can be [9]. What then makes them such a challenge in firms? Some authors [8] argue that we do not need to operationalize tacit knowledge and that we would not be able to even if we wanted to. However, instead we “find new ways of talking, fresh forms of interacting, and novel ways of distinguishing and connecting.”

III. TACIT KNOWLEDGE

The existing literature defines a clear distinction between the two dimensions of knowledge, commonly known as explicit and tacit [11]. Explicit knowledge (knowing-that) is the knowledge that can be easily articulated, codified, transmittable in formal, systematic language, and often takes the form of processes, manuals, and other types of documents.

By contrast, tacit knowledge (know-how) is knowledge embedded in the human mind, acquired over time and through various experiences throughout life. Therefore, highly personal and difficult to articulate, which can be acquired without any intention to learn or awareness of having learned, and is deeply rooted in actions, routines, values, beliefs, and emotions [6]. Therefore, the key to successful tacit knowledge transfer is “the willingness and capacity of individuals to share what they know and use what they have learned” [12].

Tacit knowledge tends to be contextual, intangible, and personal, being found in insights, hunches, intuitions, and know-how, and can only be acquired through individual processes such as learning, reflection, and experience. It manifests when individuals express themselves in presentations, phone calls, or collaborate with their peers on projects, mentoring, or training.

Thus, while the ease of replicating explicit knowledge can expose firms to the risk of their competitors gaining access to sensitive information, though not impossible, the appropriation of tacit knowledge becomes more difficult to occur due to its intangible nature. This aspect is one of the reasons why the literature associates it with sustainable competitive advantage [13].

IV. RESEARCH MODEL DEVELOPMENT

The most common psychological theories concerning knowledge-sharing intentions, behaviors, and practices have been the theories of reasoned action (TRA) and planned behavior (TPB). These theories provide a theoretical framework that has been considered the fundamental backbone for examining the psychological factors that drive knowledge-sharing behavior (KSB) [14].

The TRA, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen [15], is one of the most widely accepted and prominent health behavior change theories and has been used in knowledge-sharing studies [11]. In TRA, the beliefs that precede behavioral intentions are divided into two conceptually distinct sets: behavioral (the underlying influence on an individual’s attitude toward performing the behavior) and normative (influence of the individual’s subjective norm (SN) about performing the behavior). The theory is often used to predict how individuals will behave based on their pre-existing attitudes and behavioral intentions, stating that if someone has a positive attitude or thinks they are expected to perform a behavior, they will have the intention to do so and will be more likely to exhibit the expected behavior.

Thus, the more favorable one’s attitude toward a behavior, the stronger the intention to engage in it; the greater the subjective norm, the stronger the intention to perform it; and the stronger one’s intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely one will be to perform it. While “attitude” refers to the degree of favorable evaluations or appraisals of a behavior, SN refers to the perception that an individual has regarding whether people important to that individual believe that he or she should or should not perform a particular behavior.

Given that behavioral intention cannot be the exclusive determinant of behavior when people have incomplete volitional control, Ajzen developed the theory of planned behavior (TPB) [15] as an extension of the TRA to improve its predictive power. Since then, it has been used in various domains, including KM in business settings.

The TPB states that human behavior is guided by beliefs divided into three conceptually distinct sets: behavioral (produces a positive or negative attitude toward the behavior), normative (the normative expectations of other people or subjective norm), and control (originates the perceived behavioral control, the individual’s perception of how easy or difficult it will be to perform the behavior of interest).

Perceived behavioral control (PBC) was added for providing information about potential constraints and/or enablers on actions as perceived by the individual that can prevent or help the performance of the behavior, despite the individual’s intention concerning that behavior, and also because it “should become increasingly useful as volitional control over behavior decreases” [15]. According to TPB, behavioral achievement can be predicted by combining behavioral intention and PBC.

Previous studies [14] have found that attitude is the construct with the strongest association with intention and that intention has the strongest association with KSB (therefore, the best predictor of KSB). Although PBC has a weaker

association with KSB than intent, PBC also plays a vital role because when two individuals have the same intentions, the one who most trusts his/her own ability is more likely to share knowledge. This study integrates the TPB with individual and organizational factors to shed more light on understanding the drivers of tacit knowledge intention and behavior.

V. INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

A. Enjoyment

Individuals perform some activities just for the sake of enjoyment derived from helping others, and this behavior also provides opportunities for individuals to learn and grow [16]. Enjoyment is “derived from an individual’s motivational forces, which refer to the pleasure and satisfaction of helping others without expecting anything in return” [17]. Indeed, researchers argue that the pleasure of helping others exerts a greater influence on the attitude towards knowledge sharing than reciprocity [18].

B. Reciprocity

Reciprocity “plays an important role in fostering the innovation capability of an organization” [19] and positively affects individuals’ intentions and attitudes towards knowledge sharing [20], [21]. Relationships are perceived as being more valuable when there is reciprocity, compared to those where there is only one-way communication and can create a perception of involvement in knowledge sharing [22]. Likewise, as the relationships between individuals grow closer, the more motivated they are to perform in ways that benefit each other [23].

C. Trust

Trust is “is important among individuals involved in any business process, particularly when knowledge sharing is involved or require” [19], which is perhaps why the literature is so extensive in associating the term with KSB.

Previous studies have associated trust with subjective norms arguing that “trust implies expectations toward intention and behavior of others” [24] and also that it is a strong enabler for knowledge sharing, given that the levels of risk and uncertainty associated with tacit knowledge sharing are reduced by the presence of a high level of trust [25]. As such, “managers need to build a workplace environment that facilitates a higher level of trust between employees” [26].

VI. ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

A. Organizational climate

Organizational climate is “the shared values, norms, meanings, beliefs, myths and underlying assumptions within an organization” that guide the individuals’ behavior by conveying what behavior is appropriate and desirable. Other researchers [20] also argue that subjective norms are formed when members internalize and evaluate organizational values and norms. The organizational climate is a critical knowledge-sharing facilitator, positively influencing an individual’s subjective norms [27] and intention toward knowledge sharing [28].

B. Organizational rewards

Associations between rewards and knowledge sharing have generated extensive discussions in the literature, with several researchers differentiating the term between extrinsic rewards (such as payouts and promotions) and intrinsic rewards (such as respect and reputation enhancement).

Previous studies [29], while investigating the factors that affect the employees’ knowledge sharing behavior in business organizations, have found that expected rewards discourage the formation of a positive attitude toward knowledge sharing, arguing that “when employees compete for a limited number of incentives, they will very likely begin to see each other as competitors to their success,” and “for every person who wins, there are many others who feel they have lost.” Likewise, “the promise of rewards is manipulative and obstructs teamwork, cooperation, creativity and risk-taking among employees” [20].

Other authors [21] provided a relevant distinction, having found that the positive effect of organizational rewards is minimal on explicit knowledge sharing intentions, and negative on tacit, given that “the very nature of organizational rewards rubs against the ‘voluntary giving’ nature of tacit knowledge sharing whose intention frequently forms based on trust and collegiality.” Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model.

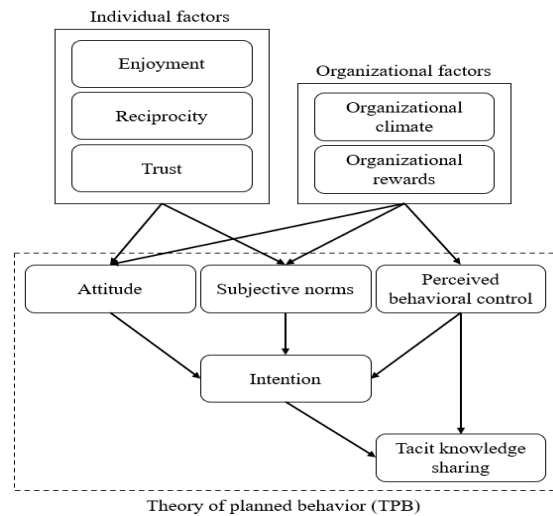


Figure 1. Research Model

VII. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study proposes an innovative research model to examine the drivers of tacit knowledge sharing intention and behavior within the teleworking context and considers individual and organizational factors. The evaluation of the proposed model and its future findings contribute to extending the literature on knowledge management and shed more light on how firms with employees in teleworking mode can focus their efforts and resources to foster tacit knowledge-sharing behavior.

Other authors can adapt and assess our model in different contexts or specific industries that want to further explore the driving individual and organizational forces behind attitudes and intentions towards enabling a tacit knowledge-sharing culture.

Future research may evaluate the proposed model by collecting data via electronic questionnaires from employees on teleworking modalities. The data collected can be evaluated using structural equation modeling techniques [30]. Results from the evaluation will indicate the strength of the relationships and the overall explanatory power of our model.

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