

Proposing Chinese Knowledge Sharing Using *Guanxi* and Organizational Commitment as Critical Mediators

Dr.Chou-Kang Chiu, Associate Professor of Ching Kuo institute of Management & Health, Taiwan

Pi-Shan Hsu, Lecture of Ching Kuo institute of Management & Health, Taiwan

Dr.Luan-Ying Wei, Assistant Professor of Ching Kuo institute of Management & Health, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Guanxi is one of the major dynamics in Chinese society, where knowledge sharing in an organization revolves around *guanxi*. Previous research conducted on *guanxi* in a Chinese society has confirmed the importance of it in the organizational setting. This research tries to explore the relationships between knowledge sharing and its antecedents by considering *guanxi* and organizational commitment as critical mediators. A conceptual model is proposed in this research. In the proposed model, knowledge sharing is influenced indirectly by outcome interdependence and coworker congruence through the mediation of *guanxi* and by distributive justice and procedural justice through the mediation of organizational commitment. Finally, several propositions are provided for future research, and prior discussions are also addressed.

KEY WORDS: Knowledge sharing, *guanxi*, organizational commitment.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing among employees may be defined as a positive force of sharing knowledge with others (Lin, 2006). This study explores the relationships between knowledge sharing and its antecedents using Chinese *guanxi* and organizational commitment as mediators. Insights into the relative merits of alternate *guanxi* relationships can be also gleaned from the knowledge-based view of the business organization (Fu et al., 2006). Grant characterized this emerging perspective as one that “views the organization as a set of knowledge assets and the role of the organization in generating and applying these assets to create value (Fu et al., 2006). The propensity for knowledge sharing in business organizations can be viewed as part of the attitudes toward pro-social organizational behaviors (Connelly and Kelloway, 2003). Numerous business organizations have tried applying reward systems to encourage employees to share their knowledge with other organizational members, but knowledge sharing is above and beyond those prescribed by job descriptions, are voluntary in nature, and cannot be directly or explicitly rewarded, due to their intangibility (Grant, 1996). This research tries to include *guanxi* and organizational commitment that may support or constrain the individual’s knowledge sharing in an organization.

Prior research has addressed the importance of knowledge sharing in a social context, and *guanxi* is an important factor in the social context in a Chinese society. Having *guanxi* with co-workers is likely to influence an individual’s beliefs and attitudes by providing salient, credible, and relevant knowledge and information about an object or situation. Even though business organizations that seek to improve knowledge sharing among their employees put huge investment on a variety of new technologies, there are more substantial determinants of knowledge sharing than the mere availability of the technologies (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003), and *guanxi* is

such a determinant that impacts knowledge sharing in the organizations. *Guanxi* is similar to the notion of strong social ties in network theory. Strong *guanxi* involves frequent social interaction, mutual trust, and a high degree of intimacy (Granovetter 1973). People who are socially connected by same business organizations, or some common background or experiences in the past such as being former classmates, or coming from the same hometown (considered typical forms of *guanxi*) would be anticipated to possess more or less similar information and knowledge (Fu et al., 2006).

Knowledge sharing apparently has a positive effect on the creation of innovative organizations, but the organizational and interpersonal factors that enhance or discourage knowledge sharing among organizational members are often ignored (Lin, 2006). Despite its importance, discussion of knowledge sharing consists of vague terminology, hand wringing and frequent summations that “it’s all about culture” (Levin, Cross, Abrams & Lesser, 2002). In response to this incorrect discussion, the objective of this study is to contribute to a thorough understanding of the process, mediators, and antecedents of knowledge sharing that ultimately aids the Chinese management in encouraging employees to share their knowledge. Besides, the proposed model of this study can also shed some light on employees’ organizational commitment that also leads to the achievement of knowledge sharing.

The main purpose of this research is to provide a theoretical understanding on the framework for knowledge sharing that is established using organizational commitment and *guanxi* as two critical mediators. This is built from the widely accepted assumption that the success of knowledge management initiatives is likely to reply heavily on having employees who are willing to share their knowledge (Hislop, 2003). Whereas there have been tentative suggestions that organizational commitment may influence the intention of employees to share knowledge (Hislop, 2003), little research has been discussed on this area by simultaneously considering the factor of *guanxi*.

More specifically, the central objective of this study is to develop a rigorous understanding to the forming process of knowledge sharing by embedding both *guanxi* and organizational commitment as critical mediators, eventually helping to achieve the success of knowledge sharing in business organizations. This study differs from previous literature in a critical point. That is, this study proposes a theoretical framework concerning knowledge sharing, *guanxi* and organizational commitment by accordingly using organizational and interpersonal antecedents (e.g., justice and congruence) as exogenous variables. This study can facilitate management to learn how to effectively boost knowledge sharing with a broad horizon during business operations.

Conceptual Model and Proposition Development

The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. In the proposed model, knowledge sharing is influenced indirectly by outcome interdependence and coworker congruence through the mediation of *guanxi* and by distributive justice and procedural justice through the mediation of organizational commitment.

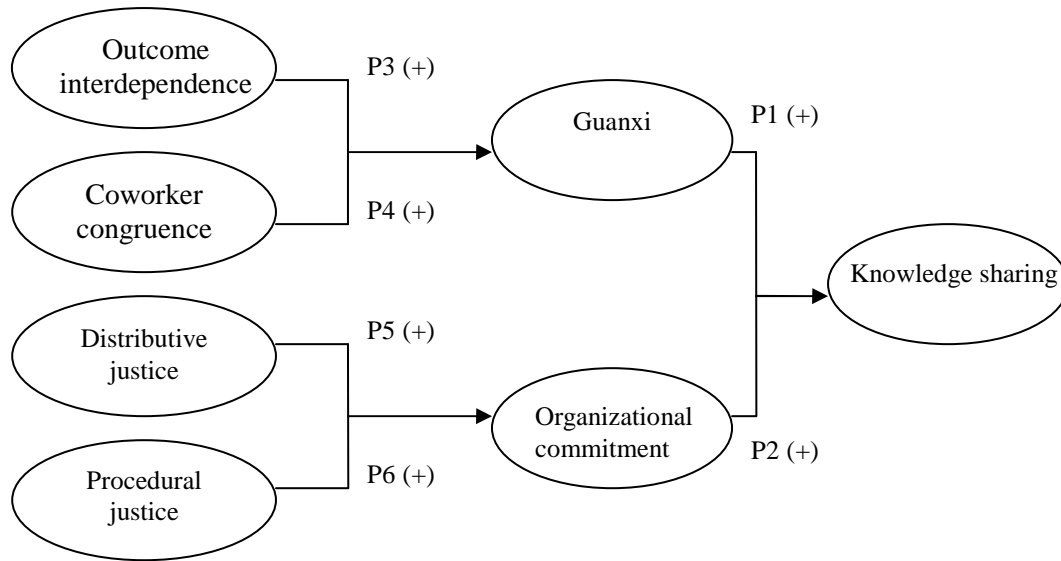


Figure 1. Conceptual model of knowledge sharing

Guanxi and knowledge sharing

Chinese are ubiquitous in which the entire society is structured around networks of social relationships which are embedded in various bases of *guanxi* (Bian, 1994). *Guanxi* is the existence of direct particularistic relationship between two or more individuals (Tsui and Farh, 1997). It is also one of the major dynamics in the Chinese society (Luo, 1997). As increasingly businessmen around the globe enter the pan Chinese market (e.g., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, etc.) and try their best to understand the complexity of the *guanxi* in the Chinese society, there is also an increasing interest among researchers to study the impact of *guanxi* on the knowledge management among Chinese firms (Fu et al., 2006).

Although previous research indicated that *guanxi* has several social psychological meanings to the parties involved and is governed by different sets of interpersonal rules (Tsui and Farh, 1997), this study further argues that *guanxi* presents a variety of social networks that have important implications for knowledge management within business firms (Fu et al., 2006). Understanding the role of *guanxi* in a Chinese society helps us discover and effectively utilize the different types of *guanxi* in sharing knowledge in business organizations, as business organizations demonstrate different needs and capacities for *guanxi* cultivation (Park and Luo, 2001).

Prior studies have stressed on the structure of *guanxi* and its relationship to outcomes. For example, it was examined that the role of *guanxi* in establishing successful organizational cultures and suggested that “not understanding the differences between the Chinese notion of *guanxi* and the American relationship notion may lead to the mismanagement of relationships between partners or between superior and subordinates of different cultural backgrounds” (Hui and Graen, 1997, p. 459). Additionally, *guanxi* was assessed as “substitutes for formal institutional support” in private-owned companies (Xin and Pearce, 1996). They found that executives of private organizations, compared to their counterparts in other sorts of business organizations (i.e., state- or foreign-owned), considered *guanxi* (business connections) as more important, gave more unreciprocated gifts to

establish or maintain such connections, and counted more on connections for protection. discussing the difference between *guanxi* and the Western concept of relational demography, Farh, Tsui, Xin and Cheng (1998) surveyed the applications of both in the Chinese vertical dyads. Their findings supported the importance of both *guanxi* and relational demography for subordinates' trust in their supervisors.

Meanwhile, Park and Luo (2001) tested the effect of *guanxi* on organizational performance and their test results indicate that Chinese business organizations apply *guanxi* to promote sales growth and market expansion as well as to competitively position the organizations. Additionally, it was drew from indigenous Chinese literature and relevant English publications by Chen and Chen (2004) to examine the intricacies of Chinese *guanxi*. Their three-stage *guanxi* model, which shows how *guanxi* is discovered, developed and utilized, suggests the subtle differences between the notion of *guanxi* in Chinese and the concept of social networks in the West.

Guanxi is an important influence on knowledge sharing, because it takes good *guanxi* for organizational members to provide each other with valuable information, future contacts, and referrals (Fu et al., 2006). *Guanxi* is highly related to knowledge sharing given the centrality of Chinese social interaction (*guanxi*) as a vehicle for knowledge learning (Cross et al., 2001). In particular, the strength and range of *guanxi* are likely to determine how much knowledge can be shared. Employees who have quality *guanxi* with their coworkers are more likely to result in strong knowledge sharing with others. As employees privy to information sharing within an organization that occurs in good *guanxi* enjoy a distinct advantage over those left out of these relationships, having no *guanxi* with others means isolation from important information and knowledge sharing. Hence, employees establishing good *guanxi* may create a subgroup that is more likely to share knowledge through its own communication channels, suggesting that good *guanxi* influence knowledge sharing positively.

There is more, employees seek information from their coworkers that they frequently interact with, because they have developed a trusting *guanxi* which allows them to share innovative information. Given that *guanxi* is an important element of social capital in a Chinese society, which facilitates knowledge sharing (Tsai, 2002). From the above discussion, the proposition can be stated as below.

P₁: *Guanxi* is positively associated with knowledge sharing.

Organization commitment and knowledge sharing

Albeit organizational commitment has interested researchers because of its beneficial effects on business organizations, relatively little has been discussed about its positive effects on knowledge sharing in an organization. To date, there exist only few studies that have assessed organizational commitment from an aspect of organizationally knowledge sharing (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003). As such, this research contributes to the literature on organizational commitment by assessing its mediating effects on knowledge sharing, which represents an important outcome in knowledge management.

According to the organization theory, organizational commitment has been suggested as a potential construct in explaining knowledge sharing in some studies (Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2001; Van den Hooff & Van Weenen, 2004). The strength of an employee's identification and involvement with a particular organization is considered organizational commitment (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Views of organizational

commitment have often highlighted the notion as an affective response to the entire organization rather than to any specific context (Farmer, Beehr, & Love, 2003).

Positively associated with individuals' willingness to commit extra effort to their workplace job (Meyer & Allen, 1997), organizational commitment is also thought to be related with willingness to donate and receive knowledge (Van den Hooff & Van Weenen, 2004). It is partially supported in previous research that the nature and pattern of individual behavior on knowledge sharing is influenced by the individuals' commitment to their immediate organizations (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Van den Hooff & Van Weenen, 2004). Employees who perceive the strong emotional attachment to their organization are likely to share their knowledge with others whenever they learn that they share their knowledge in an environment where doing so is appreciated and where their knowledge will be effectively applied and ultimately beneficial to their organization (Hall, 2001; Van den Hooff & Van Weenen, 2004).

Employees' organizational commitment is likely to facilitate their knowledge sharing with others, which would benefit their organization in a long-run horizon, given that employees who are strongly committed to their organization may attach significant importance to their organizational membership (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). The phenomenon has been supported by Jarvenpaa & Staples (2001) that strong organizational commitment engender beliefs that the organization has the right to the information and knowledge one has created or acquired. Accordingly, organizational commitment has been found to be strongly related with sales force contexts with various supportive spirits (e.g., knowledge sharing) (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Ahearne, 1998), indicating that organizational commitment is substantially associated with knowledge sharing, which reflects a crucially supportive context. Thus, the proposition is stated as follows:

P₂: Organizational commitment is positively associated with knowledge sharing.

Outcome interdependence and *guanxi*

When dealing with Chinese management, exchange (or interdependent) partners are often dependent on each other for limited resources, specialized knowledge, information, and assistance on job (Lee, Pae and Wong, 2001). Interdependence is an important determinant of *guanxi* because interdependence among organizational members has a lot to do with interpersonal social network and collaborations (Van der Vegt et al., 1998). Outcome interdependence is considered the extent to which organizational members believe that their personal benefits and costs count in the successful goal attainments by other organizational members (Lin, 2006; Van der Vegt et al., 1998).

Previous research in channel literature has applied various approaches to discuss and assess interdependence. These contain the importance of resources obtained from the relationship, the number of alternative resources from which the desired resources may be obtained, the difficulty of replacing the relationship partner (e.g. Keith, Jackson and Crosby, 1990), the level of investment in the relationship (e.g. Heide and John, 1992), and the extent to which one channel member counts on another channel member in obtaining goals or resources (Keith et al., 1990; Lee et al., 2001). Albeit outcome and task interdependence are both necessary in influencing different perspectives of organizational functioning, outcome interdependence is salient to *guanxi* given that outcome interdependence means interdependent rewards and common interests for

organizational members (Wageman, 1995), suggesting strong incentives for their willingness to maintain good relationships with other organizational members (Lin, 2006; Sias and Cahill, 1998; Jurckiewicz and Massey, 1996).

Based on social and organizational psychology, employees working under circumstances of positive outcome interdependence are more open-minded to other members' arguments and desires, and they are more concerned about organizational outcomes (Tjosvold et al., 1991; Van der Vegt et al., 1998), suggesting stronger *guanxi*. That is, when positive outcome interdependence pre-dominates, an employee who benefits from the sound job performances of fellow organizational members is more likely to emerge stronger *guanxi* with others, because *guanxi* arises in the performance of work and facilitate the transfer of physical, informational, or financial resources in an organization (Lin, 2006). Thus, the proposition is stated as below:

P₃: Outcome interdependence is positively associated with *guanxi*.

Coworker congruence and *guanxi*

Congruence can be defined as fit, compatibility or similarity (Angeles and Nath, 2001). Coworker congruence denotes a matching of individuals to their coworkers and also refers to the fit of characteristics of organizational members - that is, interpersonal compatibility (Van Vianen, 2000), suggesting coworker congruence is related with *guanxi*. Indeed, previous literature has interpreted *guanxi* is highly related with interpersonal relationships (e.g., Fu et al., 2006). Thus, it is the dynamics of *guanxi*, and, specifically the mechanisms that govern the *guanxi* relationship, that distinguishes it from the term "congruence" as it is understood in the Western cultures.

It is obvious that value congruence has a strong and permanent impact on *guanxi* among group members (e.g., Dose and Klimoski, 1999). Previous research suggests there should be congruency among the organizational components of people, formal and informal groups, and resources so as to gain internal effectiveness within an organization (Nadler et al., 1992). Employees seek for consensual validation of their opinions and values and attempt to maximize the consistency among the elements of their belief system (Byrne, 1971; Lott and Lott, 1965; Van Vianen, 2000). In other words, employees are more comfortable with coworkers who are closer concerning their own opinions and values, which in turn enhance their *guanxi* with their coworkers (Van Vianen, 2000). According to the above discussion, this research proposes that coworker congruence, conceptualized as the similarity and fit between employees' values and those values of their coworkers, result in strong *guanxi* in Chinese organizations. The proposition is thus stated as below.

P₄: Co-worker congruence is positively associated with *guanxi*.

Distributive justice and organizational commitment

Organizational justice is an influential determinant of employee behavior or attitudes in the workplace (Chang, 2002). It is also an important issue in the organizational context of knowledge sharing, because justice counts heavily upon individual's perceptions that occur within the exchange relationship and emphasizes one's perceptions about the duties that are owed by others (Caldwell, Campbell, & Parks, 2001; Primeaux, Karri, & Caldwell, 2003). According to the equity theory, previous literature has differentiated between procedural and

distributive justice while assessing organizational justice (Lin, 2006). Distributive justice represents the perceived fairness of the outcome that employees receive, while procedural justice is regarded with the perceptions of fairness about procedures used to determine those outcomes (Brockner & Siegel, 1996).

This study proposes the relationship between distributive justice and organization commitment because distributive justice has been found to predict organizational commitment in some studies (Roberts, Coulson, & Chonko, 1999). Particularly for instance, the effects of varying levels of perceived distributive justice on organizational commitment are found to be greater in conditions of low perceived procedural justice than they are in high perceived procedural justice conditions (Roberts et al., 1999). It has been indicated that pay rules, pay level and distributing tasks (forms of distributive justice) are related with organizational commitment positively. Consequently, the proposition is derived as follows:

P₅: Distributive justice is positively related to organizational commitment.

Procedural justice and organizational commitment

Whereas distributive justice and procedural justice are both associated with organizational commitment, organizational commitment seems impacted more by procedural justice than by distributive justice particularly in a Chinese society (Chang, 2002). The theoretical heritage connected to the relationship between procedural justice and organizational commitment stems from the domain of justice-based research (Lind & Tyler, 1988), which suggests procedural justice judgments of employees in general have positively unambiguous effects on higher-order attitudes of commitment (Kim & Mauborgne, 1991). The path analyses of data from internal audit supervisors and staff level auditors suggested that satisfaction with promotion opportunities (a typical kind of distributive justice) and satisfaction with the evaluation criteria used (a typical kind of procedural justice) are strongly correlated with organizational commitment for the respective groups (Quarles, 1994; Roberts et al., 1999). That is, procedural justice is more strongly associated with institutional evaluations that require a long-term observation, like organizational commitment (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Hence, the proposition is derived as follows:

P₆: Procedural justice is positively associated with organizational commitment.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This research suggests that outcome interdependence, co-worker congruence, distributive justice and procedural justice have indirect influences on knowledge sharing via the mediation of *guanxi* and organizational commitment. It appears that low knowledge sharing may be attributed to a lack of interpersonal relationship or organization-person interaction. Hence, management may recheck their internal organizational atmosphere, because the atmosphere that efficiently fosters interpersonal relationship (e.g., *guanxi*) and organization-person interaction (organizational commitment) may intrinsically generate strong knowledge sharing. For instance, if outcome interdependence is well taken care of and employees perceiving close interdependence, they are likely to maintain good workplace partnerships with others, suggesting good quality *guanxi*.

There might be a variety of training methods, such as the practice of a focus group, active listening, team building, and expressing thoughts and emotions, which can be beneficial for employees not only to understand

the degree of mutual assistance between them and their co-workers, but also to learn about how to get along well and effectively communicate with co-workers (Lin, 2006). A scan for the *guanxi* perceived by employees can be an essential checkpoint to evaluate knowledge sharing). To assist management particularly in tailoring management practices to different individuals, employees should be administered a standard battery of surveys periodically, which should include measurements of *guanxi*, organizational commitment and their antecedents (Lin, 2006). Throughout the evaluation of their perceptions, management can filter out unnecessary negative impacts coming either interpersonal relationship or from the organization-person interaction (Lin, 2006).

A stronger influence of *guanxi* on knowledge sharing implies that *guanxi* can effectively reduce “cognitive noise” and finally facilitates strong knowledge sharing. To sum up, management should take the *guanxi* as a precedent indicator for employees when assessing the level of knowledge sharing in an organization. If management ignore the critical influence of *guanxi*, employees may immediately respond with low knowledge sharing.

The influence of co-worker congruence on *guanxi* implies that employees demonstrate a strong need of friendships with co-workers. This phenomenon provides the support that friendships develop, due to proximity and shared experience among homogenous co-workers (Berman et al., 2002; Lin, 2006). Management should prioritize the co-worker congruence as a critical determinant for understanding the *guanxi* among employees. The frequent workshop for learning communication skills is necessary for employees, since it takes knowledgeable communication practices to recognize the values of co-workers and gradually achieve co-worker congruence (Lin, 2006).

The influence of outcome interdependence on *guanxi* implies that employees demonstrate substantial workplace partnerships with co-workers when perceiving that they and their co-workers share the same destiny of team honor or dishonor (Lin, 2006). A fair policy of shared rewards and advancement opportunities based on the entire team’s performance may thrust employees into close workplace partnerships with their co-workers (Combs, 2003). Meanwhile, good quality communication between management and employees is able to enhance interpersonal understanding regarding their own responsibilities of being cooperative members in a team (e.g., Lin, 2006). Realistic job reviews, orientation training, and internal education for employees can help them learn their outcome interdependence in depth, ultimately resulting in strong knowledge sharing (e.g., Lin, 2006).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research suffers from a critical limitations. That is, the major limitation is that this study is an exploratory one developed from a qualitative point of view. The future empirical work based on this study may help learn more insights about knowledge sharing. The model developed and validated herein could benefit from being tested from either a cross-sectional or longitudinal designs. Future studies can try to improve such shortcomings by directly observing the subjects over time and using a large sample sizes so that the genuine antecedents of *guanxi* and knowledge sharing can be transparently found. Future studies can also decompose organizational commitment into several different dimensions (e.g., affective organizational commitment) so that their influences on knowledge sharing can be known in depth.

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