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# Individual attitudes and organisational knowledge sharing

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## Abstract

The purpose of this empirical study is to explore how employees process information after they have collected it, and investigate how individual attitudes to learning, sharing and storing influence organisational knowledge sharing. The data are derived from 499 respondents working in international tourist hotels in Taiwan. The results show that two significant factors, individual attitudes to (a) learning and (b) sharing, significantly impact on organisational knowledge sharing. This study implies that front-line managers should help rank-and-file employees to both learn and share knowledge and encourage the habituation of such behaviour patterns. It is suggested that this practice would enhance organisational performance.
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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Today the business environment is more competitive and uncertain than in the past. In order to succeed, organisations have to rapidly create new knowledge, products and services. A study of the research literature published over the last decade suggests that some companies have gained benefit from establishing knowledge management (KM) practices. Parlby (1998), Ahmed, Lim, and Zairi (1999) and Lim, Ahmed, and Zairi (1999) have all demonstrated that the benefits include: (a) minimising potential losses on intellectual capital from employees leaving; (b) improving job performance by enabling all employees to easily retrieve knowledge when required; (c) increasing employee satisfaction by obtaining knowledge from others and gaining from reward systems; (d) providing better products and services; and (e) making better decisions. These factors result in retaining and improving competitiveness in the marketplace. In addition, Beckett's (2000) study indicates that KM implementation enables an organisation to eliminate the duplication of knowledge, i.e. to avoid "silo operations".

KM has been studied in several disciplines. Much of the literature describes KM from an information technology (IT) perspective; a perspective possibly over-emphasised by some scholars and practitioners. IT clearly plays a crucial role in new approaches to managing knowledge. However, as Nonaka (1985, 1988), Sveiby and Lloyd (1987), and Davenport and Prusak (2000) have argued, technology is designed and operated by people, and its contribution to managing knowledge depends on fitting an organisational social context. As Puccinelli (1998) states, "knowledge is fundamentally a product of people and not technology. …Sharing is such a valuable component to the success of KM because it focuses on the human side of knowledge (p. 40)". This human focus is also reinforced by Büchel and Raub (2002). They claim that, as information and knowledge are recorded on devices of IT, sometimes it might be difficult for knowledge receivers to understand the context of the origination of the knowledge.

As a result, individuals play a crucial role in implementing KM practices. Guthrie (2001) and Stovel and Bontis (2002) indicate that employees are major contributors to overall organisational effectiveness. Consequently, the requirement for employee involvement in organisational knowledge generation is growing in importance. For

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example, managers can involve employees in developing problem-solving alternatives and enlarging organisational resources. Under these circumstances outcomes can be significantly determined by individual attitudes to learning, sharing and storing knowledge. Yet, in spite of the number of previous KM studies, there seems to be a paucity of research investigating the influence of these factors on knowledge sharing and management.

Recently, increasing numbers of hotels have applied the concept of the profit centre at department level (Arora, 2002). As one department needs a product or service from another, funds are transferred in exchange. This process may lead to the construction of invisible boundaries between departments, and the danger exists that antagonistic rather than collaborative attitudes emerge between competing sections. Therefore, knowledge collecting, sharing and storing may become more difficult. The issue of how this acquiring, sharing and retaining affects hotels' effectiveness has been ignored by academic researchers in hospitality, and apparently also by hotel managers. If these concepts could be applied to business operations, it seems hotel owners could gain valuable assets in terms of knowledge that can improve business competitiveness.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the influence of individual attitudes on the outcomes of KM implementation, in particular of knowledge sharing. The research investigates how individual attitudes to learning, sharing and storing affect knowledge sharing. It also examines how employees process information after they have collected it.

### 1.2. Research on KM in the tourism literature

In the tourism and hospitality literature, few empirical studies have examined the capture of individual knowledge and its subsequent sharing and transfer to become an organisational asset. The literature mainly focuses on areas of quality assurance, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction and yield management. The knowledge *sharing* issue can be seen in some of these areas but the discussion focuses more on control and power; for example, empowerment, delegation, sharing risks and ownership of the job. These issues are often discussed in the context of how to implement reward programs, including intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and profit sharing (Brymer, 1991; Hales & Klidas, 1998; Lefever & Reich, 1991; Partlow, 1993). In addition, although the literature addresses issues of IT, it concentrates on the introduction and development of those technologies and their costs and benefits rather than impacts on knowledge sharing and use (see for instance, Feinstein & Stefanelli, 1999; Hudson, 1994; Jones, 1996; Van Hoof, Verbeeten, & Combrink, 1996).

However, notable studies such as Yang (2004a), show that, after acquiring job-related information and knowledge, many interviewees in one hotel would think, reflect and provide feedback on what they had learned, and then make changes if applicable. On the other hand, in other companies, the learning attitude of employees was quite passive; they usually waited for instructions. That raises the question, what causes these differences?

Yang and Wan (2004), drawing on a sample from international tourist hotels in Taiwan, indicate that in one hotel, a climate favourable to KM seemed to exist on an informal basis. In others, the climate did not favour KM although some employees acted on their superiors' instructions or used their own approach to learn new things. Apparently some managers had not seriously considered the benefits of KM practices, and appeared unconcerned about the effect of losing individual knowledge even though they had a general belief that KM could help their company. All of the top managers realised that nurturing a KM climate was important although paradoxically they did not formally foster this culture or tackle factors inhibiting KM. In short, a prerequisite of effective knowledge interflow and storage is to develop an organisational culture where knowledge sharing and acquiring are explicitly encapsulated into each job and to provide resources such as time, training to develop the required work culture of KM. Most managers had not yet taken such steps.

## 2. Fundamental theory

### 2.1. Knowledge management

A comprehensive approach to defining KM that is useful is Rowley's (2000) emphasis on identifying, sharing, creating and storing of knowledge in pursuit of organisational learning (OL):

> Knowledge management is concerned with the exploitation and development of the knowledge assets of an organisation with a view to furthering the organisation's objectives. The knowledge to be managed includes both explicit, documented knowledge, and tacit, subjective knowledge. Management entails all of those processes associated with the identification, sharing and creation of knowledge. This requires systems for the creation and maintenance of knowledge repositories, and to cultivate and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and organisational learning (p. 11).

Of these stages, creation has received considerable focus from scholars who explicitly distinguish knowledge creation (KC) from KM. KC involves continuously replenishing knowledge to deal with unresolved situations in an organisation, while KM adds to KC "the systemisation of existing knowledge" (Bajaria, 2000, p. S562). In other words, KM focuses on efficient and systematic use of existing knowledge, whereas KC deals with the acquisition and reformation of new knowledge. Nonaka, a key proponent of many of the concepts behind KC, similarly distinguishes KC from KM. More explicitly, Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka (2000) propose that "the creation of knowledge cannot be managed, only enabled (p. 3)".

Nonaka and Konno (1998, p. 42) emphasise that "knowledge creation is a spiralling process of interaction