



## Factors affecting knowledge sharing in the virtual organisation: Employees' sense of well-being as a mediating effect



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

#### Keywords:

Knowledge-sharing behaviour  
Social capital  
Sense of well-being  
Partial least squares (PLS)

### ABSTRACT

In view of the importance of employees' knowledge sharing, this research, which draws on social capital theory and employees' sense of well-being, develops a comprehensive theoretical model which aims to explore deeply the mediating impact of employees' sense of well-being on social capital and the contribution of knowledge in the complex context of a virtual organisation. The quantitative approach was conducted at a virtual organisation of Taiwanese NGOs. 135 valid questionnaires were distributed and retrieved personally; subsequently these were analysed using partial least squares (PLS). The findings revealed that employees' sense of well-being improved considerably when they demonstrated stronger levels of social capital tendency. Meanwhile, employees increasingly contributed, not only their tacit but also their explicit knowledge, when they experienced a greater sense of well-being. Even more surprisingly, the results showed that employees' sense of well-being played a positively and pivotally mediating role in the relationship between social capital and employees' tacit and explicit knowledge-sharing behaviour in the virtual organisation. These suggest that managers within virtual organisations urgently need strategies to create an ambiance in which employees can feel a sense of well-being in order to enhance their willingness to share both their explicit and tacit knowledge.

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### 1. Introduction

Considering the importance of employees' knowledge sharing (Zhang, de Pablos, & Zhou, 2013), together with the ever-accelerating expansion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), an increasing number of organisations are gradually changing their knowledge management and operating modes, moving from conventional face-to-face relationships to virtual ones. Many such organisations have begun to adopt the concept of the virtual organisation owing to the fact that such an organisation consists of companies whose employees have the characteristics of working cooperatively, coordinating flexibly and organising dynamically in order to reflect business requirements (Goldman, Nagel, & Preiss, 1995). Prior research studies have validated that knowledge-sharing behaviour is strongly associated with social incentives (Chow & Chan, 2008; Zhang, de Pablos, & Zhang, 2012) and personal intrinsic motivation (Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Yet, the reasons and motives for exchanging and sharing knowledge among employees in a virtual organisation

seem more complex and difficult to comprehend as compared with those in an independent organisation (Alge, Wiethoff, & Klein, 2003). For instance, one major concern is that social relationships among employees in a virtual organisation may be a critical factor prohibiting their knowledge-sharing behaviour because of their short-term nature (Zhang, de Pablos, & Xu, 2014).

Recently, rather than considering negative psychology, an often overlooked yet pivotal element in positive psychology, the sense of well-being, has gradually emerged and been explored in western countries (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A wealth of research has suggested that individuals with a greater sense of well-being and satisfaction are correspondingly more successful in an organisation (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). For some instances, the sense of well-being has been shown to be strongly related to helping co-workers (George, 1991), offering social support to colleagues (Iverson, Olekalns, & Erwin, 1998), and to income (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Most researchers have assumed that such indicators of success in the workplace are the result of individuals being happy (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008). However, no research seems to have explored in detail whether employees' sense of well-being can lead to knowledge-sharing and the increased success of an organisation. This may be an oversight as a sense of well-being in individuals elicits positive behav-

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our such as knowledge-sharing. Furthermore, the alternative hypothesis posited by this study, that employees' sense of well-being plays a critical mediating role in the relationship between social capital and employees' both tacit and explicit knowledge-sharing behaviour, may be equally plausible.

This research aims to investigate employees' knowledge-sharing behaviour in the virtual organisation of Taiwanese NGOs. In fact, with the accelerating sense of social democracy in Taiwan and the nation's continuous economic development, a considerable number of social organisations, such as Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), have proliferated with a view to providing a range of social welfare services in order to make up for deficiencies in the public welfare provided by the Taiwanese government. According to statistical data from the Department of Statistics, Ministry of the Interior, Republic of China (Taiwan) in 2013, 40,316 NGOs have been established in Taiwan. However, [Drucker \(1990\)](#) states that, unlike For-Profit Organisations, Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) need to be managed more effectively. [Chi, Yeh, and Yu \(2008\)](#) further suggest that NGOs often lack knowledge of management and that this can hinder their organisational development. Having considering this lack of development in Taiwanese NGOs and the importance of knowledge sharing, this research, drawing on social capital theory and the sense of well-being, focuses mainly on investigating the willingness of employees to share their knowledge in the whole system of Farmers' Associations which is categorised as a virtual organisation. Consequently, the particular objectives of this research are to: (1) investigate the relationship between social capital and employees' sense of well-being within the virtual organisation; (2) explore the role of employees' sense of well-being in their knowledge sharing in the context of the virtual organisation; (3) understand the correlation between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing in the virtual organisation. These proposed objectives help in answering four research questions: (1) How can social capital explain employees' sense of well-being? (2) How can employees' sense of well-being facilitate their knowledge sharing in the virtual organisation? (3) How can employees' sense of well-being mediate in the relationship between social capital and knowledge sharing in the virtual organisation? (4) How can employees' tacit knowledge sharing facilitate their explicit knowledge sharing in the virtual organisation?

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Social capital tendency

The concept of social capital mentioned by [Jacobs \(1965\)](#) has been widely used over the past few decades to explore the sociological domain. [Bourdieu \(1986\)](#) states that social capital is a term for the collective unit by which collective members obtain actual or potential resources and effectively mobilise their own group; through social capital, a durable network is formed. Later, the comprehensive understanding of the theoretical dimensions of social capital outlined by [Nahapiet and Ghoshal \(1998\)](#) suggests that the theory consists of structural, cognitive and relational dimensions; these explore members' interpersonal relationships and organisational phenomena. Nowadays, researchers widely apply social capital theory to investigate and comprehend the organisational phenomena and interpersonal relationships associated with knowledge sharing and organisational performance in the domain of Management Information Systems (MIS), particularly knowledge management (e.g., [Chow & Chan, 2008](#); [Hau, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2013](#); [He, Qiao, & Wei, 2009](#); [Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998](#); [Wasko & Faraj, 2005](#)). In the meantime, the majority of research studies have posited that social network ties, shared goals and trust are the major constructs corresponding to structural capital, cognitive capital and relational capital respectively for exploring

individuals' willingness to share knowledge in organisations ([Chow & Chan, 2008](#); [Hau et al., 2013](#); [He et al., 2009](#)). Hence, based on the above-mentioned perspectives and the theoretical development of this research, this study chose to adopt, as its research model, shared goals, trust and social network ties corresponding to cognitive capital, relational capital and structural capital respectively.

### 2.2. Employees' sense of well-being

Positive psychology in terms of well-being has been discussed a great deal in western countries, in particular focusing on senior citizens and adolescents. This growing number of researchers has gradually divided into two camps considering different yet related perspectives or factors: namely, hedonism and eudemonism ([Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)). [Table 1](#), integrated by this study, shows relevant literature revolving around the sense of well-being.

With regard to the concept of subjective well-being, [Russell \(2008\)](#) states that this concerns individuals' perspectives of their life experiences, including an affective and cognitive appraisal of their lives. [Ryan and Deci \(2001\)](#) clarify that subjective well-being can be a sensation which combines and is appraised in terms of three dimensions. These are: (1) satisfaction, (2) positive factors, and (3) negative aspects. Thus, individuals might have a greater sense of well-being when they demonstrate higher levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction, together with lower levels of negative aspects ([Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002](#)). Likewise, an individual possessing positive emotional characteristics was likely to increase his/her satisfaction with life ([Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, & Conway, 2009](#)). [Schwarz and Clore \(2007\)](#) suggested that individuals depended on their emotional experiences to evaluate their satisfaction with life. Hence, individuals' satisfaction with their lives is equally and highly associated with the existence of positive emotions and the absence of negative ones. Meanwhile, the job and life satisfaction of an individual are highly correlated and inter-related ([Saari & Judge, 2004](#)). Since an individual's job plays an important role in his/her life, job satisfaction may spill over into life satisfaction or vice versa ([Saari & Judge, 2004](#)). Consequently, in view of various instruments and the complex abstract concept of an individual's sense of well-being, this research adopted the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire Short-Form (OHQ) developed by [Hills and Argyle \(2002\)](#) in relation to the scale for psychological well-being. The main reason for this was that the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) stemmed from the Oxford Happiness Inventory ([Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989](#)) developed by [Hills and Argyle \(2002\)](#). This has been widely commended for its robust construct validity and sustainable positive correlation with the measures of self-esteem, extraversion, satisfaction with life, the life regard index, the depression-happiness scale and OHI ([Hills & Argyle, 2002](#); [Joseph & Lewis, 1998](#); [Robbins, Francis, & Edwards, 2010](#)).

### 2.3. Tacit and explicit knowledge-sharing behaviour

[Nonaka \(1994\)](#) and [Nonaka and Takeuchi \(1995\)](#), who put forward the SECI model, explain the generation, creation and transfer of knowledge, which can be classified into four modes: socialisation, externalisation, combination and internalisation, moving between tacit and explicit knowledge. In this model, the explicit knowledge of an individual can be articulated by him/herself so that this type of knowledge can be written down, taped or made into a tangible form ([Reychav & Weisberg, 2009](#)). Meanwhile, an individual's contribution to tacit knowledge is widely viewed as a critical element of improving organisational competitive advantage ([Reychav & Weisberg, 2009](#)). Fundamentally, tacit knowledge appertains to highly personalised knowledge which is difficult to formalise or write down ([Nonaka, 1991](#)). [Hau et al. \(2013\)](#) further

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