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How Shared Language and Shared Vision Motivate Effective Knowledge Sharing Behavior

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Abstract: Effective knowledge sharing within project teams is of critical importance to knowledge-intensive organizations. Prior research studies indicate a positive association between shared cognitive perspective and effective knowledge sharing behavior among co-workers. Building on these studies and drawing from theoretical foundations found in the sociological and social-psychological literature on organizational trust and knowledge sharing, this study sought to test the effect of shared perspective (i.e. shared language and shared vision) on organizational knowledge sharing behavior.

The data were provided by 275 'legal professionals' and paralegals who were all knowledge workers engaged in shared legal project work at one of Canada's largest multijurisdictional law firms. The nature of their work required a significant reliance on co-workers for both explicit and tacit knowledge. Multiple regression analysis, among other statistical techniques, was used to test the hypotheses and determine significant relationships.

Overall, having a shared cognitive perspective had a positive effect on knowledge sharing behavior in the firm. Results showed a positive relationship between shared perspective and willingness to share knowledge; where higher amounts of shared language or shared vision led to higher willingness by the respondent to share with their co-worker, regardless of working relationship. Results also showed a positive relationship between shared vision and willingness to use knowledge. Surprisingly, no significant relationships were found between shared language and willingness to use knowledge in either group.

Interestingly, the results also suggested that both shared language and shared vision led to a significantly higher perception that knowledge received from positive referent co-workers was useful. However, neither shared language nor shared vision had a significant effect with negative referents. This finding suggested a need to further explore the effect of working relationships in subsequent research.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing behavior, shared language, shared vision, shared perspective.

For professional service firms, knowledge is recognized as being one of the most important internal resources. The effective internal sharing of knowledge promises many benefits to the individual and the firm. However, most companies struggle with sharing knowledge (Ruggles, 1998) because promoting internal knowledge sharing is a technological and behavioral challenge. KM research acknowledges these challenges by focusing on technological issues and more recently on human and social factors (Hislop, 2003). Understanding the impact of these factors on knowledge sharing behavior (KSB) assists in understanding: what makes one share their knowledge inside the firm?

The phenomenon of interest in this study was the KSB of professionals involved in project-based group work, for one of Canada's largest multijurisdictional law firms. The study examined the direct relationships between co-worker shared perspective and KSB. Shared perspective factors included *shared vision* and *shared language*. KSBs included *willingness to share knowledge*, *willingness to use knowledge* and *perceived receipt of useful knowledge*. The theoretical framework is presented in Figure 1. In this study two main hypotheses were generated: H_1 Shared language is positively related to KSB. H_2 Shared vision is positively related to KSB.

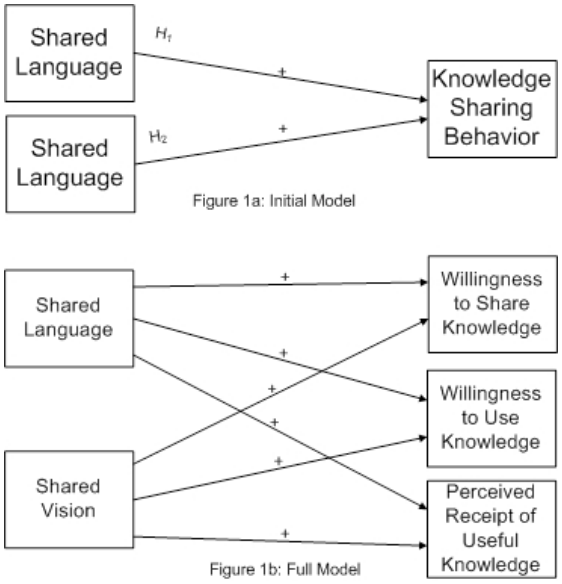

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

1. Understanding KSB

Some researchers have attempted to understand knowledge sharing by measuring data/information flow or information awareness (Cross and Cummings, 2004). However, these approaches are conceptually problematic, as the flow of data/information, alone, does not guarantee knowledge sharing. Additionally, knowing who possesses certain knowledge, alone, does not guarantee that the person is accessible or willing to help. Neither approach accurately measures knowledge sharing, only remnants of the knowledge sharing process.

This research used a behavioral approach to understand knowledge sharing, one that considered three behavioral conditions necessary for effective knowledge sharing behavior to occur: the source must be willing to share their knowledge; the receiver must be willing to receive and use the knowledge that is shared; and the receiver must perceive the knowledge shared as useful to their individual/team work, or the organization. These are important conditions since knowledge sharing requires a willingness to participate in the process from both ends. When a person is approached to share what they know they are asked to make an investment of valuable time, often without the likelihood of reward or recognition. This investment of time may be significant, as extensive interaction may need to take place to assure that the knowledge seeker understands. This investment of time may reduce the individual's willingness to share knowledge or use knowledge shared.

Using these three conditions, this paper explores whether effective KSB of knowledge workers may be based, in part, on the shared language and vision between them. Specifically, that shared language and vision have a positive effect on: the willingness of the source to share their knowledge; the willingness of the receiver to use the knowledge shared; and the perception by the receiver that the knowledge exchanged was useful.

2. Prior Research

Knowledge is highly contextual and circumstantial (Goman, 2002); it is always developed in a specific context and is rarely interpreted by the receiver in the exact way it was intended by the transmitter (Husted and Michhailova, 2002). A key problem is representing the context in which knowledge is created and is relevant (Choo, 2000), which makes transferring knowledge problematic (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Empson, 2001).

Reasons for contextual mismatches include differences in mental/conceptual frameworks or culture and language (Hendricks, 1999). Knowledge is easier to transfer when it is rooted in the domain or practice of the individuals participating (Brown and Duguid, 1998). Nonaka (2002) makes a similar argument with information: "the mere transfer of information will often make little sense if it is abstracted from embedded emotions and nuanced contexts that are associated with shared experiences" (p. 442). For knowledge to be shared, the receiver and the transmitter must share a contextual base. The receiver must possess what Swap, et al (2001) call a "hook" or "receptor" which assimilates the information provided by the transmitter. Argyres (1999) called this "a 'technical grammar' for communication" (p. 162).

Based on the work of Levin, Whitener and Cross (2006), two variables were proposed to measure the extent to which a shared perspective existed between co-workers: *Shared Language* and *Shared Vision*. The authors (2006) defined shared language as the extent to which the "knowledge receiver and source seem on the same wavelength" (p.1166). 'Same wavelength' was an idiom, to describe a situation in which the sender and receiver were able to easily understand, communicate, and agree. Based on the work of Levin, Whitener and Cross (2006) and Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) shared vision was defined as the extent to which a source and receiver (in the eyes of the receiver) share goals, concerns and purpose.

2.1 Shared Language and KSB

Triandis (1960) found connections between similarity in language and effective communication. Tsoukas and Vladimirou (2001) proclaimed a common language as the most important cultural tool needed in assisting an individual in 'drawing distinctions' within a collectively generated 'domain of action'. Nonaka (1994) argued that shared language was paramount to the transfer and integration of tacit knowledge rooted in the sharing of common schemata and frameworks such as stories, analogies and metaphors.

Research also found that shared language facilitated KSB through: a common understanding of how to act (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998); an ability to gain access to the right people for information (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998); a "common conceptual apparatus for evaluating the likely benefits of exchange" (Chiu, Hsu and Wang, 2006, p. 1878); and a common framework for the combination of knowledge (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Several of these benefits were represented in Zenger and Lawrence's (1989) research, which found that shared language determined the efficiency of communication by acting as guide for how information was interpreted and responded to. Henderson (2005) also concluded that language diversity affected knowledge sharing through interpretation, ultimately influencing overall team performance. Ojha (2005) found a significant connection between language compatibility and the likelihood of participating in KSB. Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) added a distinction between the differential effects shared language had on quality and quantity of knowledge; suggesting shared language to have a significant positive effect on quality of knowledge shared, and no effect on quantity.

2.2. *Shared Vision and KSB*

Research has found that shared vision helps workers see the potential value of their knowledge exchange (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998) and provides a guideline for understanding which knowledge was worth acquiring and disseminating (Hoe and McShane, 2002). Also, if shared vision was high among co-workers then the knowledge sharing process could tolerate a certain degree of 'inefficiency", as long as the bulk of employees actions were pointed in a unified direction (Hoe and McShane, 2002).

Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) found that teams who shared a vision were more likely to participate in knowledge sharing and resource exchange activities. Chang et al, (2011) showed that shared vision was a necessary precondition for knowledge sharing and that it had a positive effect on overall willingness to share knowledge, ideas, opinions, and to answer colleague questions. Similarly, Hoe and McShane (2002) found shared vision to be a strong predictor for knowledge sharing.

Finally, Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) found shared vision to have a significant positive effect on quality of knowledge shared and, more interestingly, a significant negative effect on quantity. This finding suggested that having a higher shared vision encouraged more succinct meaningful exchanges between individuals.

3.Method

3.1 Data Collection

Data were collected as part of a larger study examining the social-cognitive processes and outcomes of knowledge workers. Respondents were engaged in shared legal project work at one of Canada's largest multijurisdictional law firms. The nature of their work required a significant reliance on co-workers, across offices nationwide, for both explicit and tacit forms of knowledge. The nature of the projects allowed respondents to objectively evaluate the project's outcomes, giving a better sense of the perceived effects of knowledge shared.

After pretesting, the survey was published on the web using an academic survey suite. A senior partner then sent a firm-wide email inviting approximately 900 legal professionals and paralegals/law clerks in six national offices to participate. To be eligible, the respondent had to be assigned to a project with at least two members. All those contacted were knowledge workers engaged in knowledge-intensive legal project work. Of the potential respondents, 775 were "legal professionals" which the firm defined as lawyers (735), trademark or patent agents (30), accountants (5 or 6), or governmental professionals (5 or 6). In addition, 120 questionnaires were sent to "paralegals" and "law clerks". No administrative staff participated.

The survey had three sections, asking respondents to answer questions about: themselves and their background; a positive referent (i.e. Group 1); and a negative referent (i.e. Group 2). Similar distinctions were made by McAllister (1995), Tsui (1984, 1986) and Holste (2003). This approach was also motivated by a conceptual distinction in the types of relationships that occur within these settings. For example, employees rarely have free choice in deciding with whom they work and are required to share knowledge. Frequently, employees are required to share knowledge with individuals they work well with and those who they do not work well with to achieve project objectives.

3.2 *Data Analysis*

In total, 275 surveys were completed for a response rate of 30.6%. Principal factor analysis was used to investigate clustering of variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the scales. Next, hypotheses were tested using correlation analysis to measure the bivariate relationships between the independent and dependent variables. T-tests were used to calculate the differences in mean levels of the dependent variables by category of the independent variables. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the relationships between the dependent variables and the focal independent variable, while controlling for all the other variables in the model. The results of the regression analysis were always given priority.

4.Measures

4.1 *Shared Language and Shared Vision*

The shared language variable was adapted from Levin, Whitener and Cross (2006) and was indicated by a 3-item measure. Sample items included: "*On this project, I could understand completely what this person meant when he or she was talking*" and "*on this project, I was*

familiar with the jargon/terminology that he or she used". The shared vision variable was adapted from Levin, Whitener and Cross (2006) and Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) and was indicated by a 4-item measure. Sample items included: "*On this project, I assumed that this person and I cared about the same issues*" and "*on this project, I believed that this person and I shared a commitment to a common purpose*." All shared perspective items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 – Strongly Disagree, 5 – Strongly Agree).

Factor analysis confirmed the items for both factors and Cronbach's α exceeded the acceptable range (DeVellis, 1991) for both variables in both groups (Table 1).

Reliability Statistics	**Group 1**		**Group 2**	
	α	**# of Items**	**α**	**# of Items**
Shared Language	0.882	3	0.776	3
Shared Vision	0.887	4	0.862	4

Table 1 Cronbach's α for Shared Language and Shared Vision

4.2 KSB

Following Holste (2003) and Levin and Cross (2004), KSB was measured using three factors (overall willingness to share knowledge (WSO), overall willingness to use knowledge (WUO), and perceived receipt of useful knowledge (PRUK). WSO and WUO were further divided into four variables to separate explicit and tacit forms of knowledge (i.e. willingness to share explicit knowledge (WSE), willingness to share tacit knowledge (WST), willingness to use explicit knowledge (WUE), willingness to use tacit knowledge (WST)). Explicit knowledge referred to precedents, memos, client and industry information. Tacit knowledge included rules of thumb, tricks of the trade, insights, new ideas, and in some cases rumors. Perceived receipt of useful knowledge was a respondent's perception of how useful the knowledge shared was to them, the project or the firm. Specific outcomes measured included individual performance, client satisfaction, project quality, team performance and overall success of the firm.

WSO was indicated using a 4-item measure. Sample items included: "*I would take initiative to provide this individual with useful tools I have developed (e.g. precedents, memos, client information, industry information*" and "*I would allow this individual to spend significant time observing me in order for them to better understand and learn from my work*". WUO was indicated using a 5-item measure. Sample items included: "*I would welcome and use any rules of thumb, tricks of the trade, and other insights they have learned*" and "*I would eagerly receive and consider any new ideas this individual might have*". All WSO and WUO items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 – Strongly Disagree, 5 – Strongly Agree). PRUK was indicated using a 6-item measure. Sample items included: "*The information you received from each of the co-workers made (or is likely to make) the following contributions to: Client satisfaction with the matter/project"* and *"the project team's overall performance".* PRUK items were measured on a 5-point scale (1 – Very negative, 5 – Very positive).

Factor analysis confirmed the items for each of the three KSB factors and Cronbach's α exceeded the acceptable range (Table 2).

Reliability Statistics	**Group 1**		**Group 2**	
	α	**# of Items**	**α**	**# of Items**
Overall Willingness to Share Knowledge	0.859	4	0.908	4
Willingness to Share Knowledge (Tacit Only)	0.799	3	0.889	3
Overall Willingness to Use Knowledge	0.877	5	0.878	5
Overall Willingness to Use Knowledge (Tacit Only)	0.857	4	0.869	4
Perceived Receipt of Useful Knowledge	0.917	6	0.917	6

Table 2 Cronbach's α for KSBs

5.Results

5.1 *Shared Language and KSB*

Correlation analysis was first used to examine the bivariate relationship between *shared language* and KSB. Table 3 summarizes the results of the correlation analysis between *shared language* and each of the KSBs. Multiple regression analysis (MRA) was then used to examine the relationship between *shared language* and KSB, while taking into account the effect of the other independent variables. Table 4 shows the results of the MRA of KSB on *shared language* and other independent variables. MRA was repeated for willingness to share and use *each* type of knowledge (i.e. explicit and tacit) as a DV. This allowed the examination of the effect of shared language on each type of knowledge.

	Group 1		Group 2	
KSB DVs	Correlation	N	Correlation	N
WSO	0.473***	260	0.152*	257
WSE	0.434***	263	0.161**	259
WST	0.454***	260	0.130	259
WUO	0.343***	259	0.210**	256
WUE	0.333***	263	0.130*	262
WUT	0.322***	262	0.191**	258
PRUK	0.431***	259	0.108	259

Table 3 Correlations between Shared Language and KSB (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

KSB DVs	Beta for Shared Language only	T	N	Model Adj. R^2	Model F	Model Sig.
Group 1						
WSO	.320***	4.330	189	0.424	12.540	0
WSE	.325***	4.074	192	0.329	8.789	0
WST	.294***	3.892	189	0.399	11.384	0
WUO	0.047	0.584	188	0.316	8.185	0
WUE	0.095	1.156	192	0.288	7.444	0
WUT	0.036	0.438	190	0.298	7.674	0
PRUK	0.123	1.667	189	0.434	13.030	0
Group 2						
WSO	0.099	1.362	189	0.203	4.996	0
WSE	.146*	1.993	191	0.177	4.416	0
WST	0.073	0.999	189	0.186	4.574	0
WUO	-0.026	-0.371	186	0.277	6.896	0
WUE	-0.043	-0.595	191	0.215	5.328	0
WUT	-0.026	-0.365	187	0.266	6.613	0
PRUK	-0.039	-0.558	189	0.247	6.151	0

Table 4 Regression of KSB on Shared Language and Other IVs (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

Overall, MRA indicated that respondents had a higher willingness to share both tacit and explicit knowledge with positive referents they shared a common language with. MRA also suggested that respondents had a higher *WSE* with negative referents they felt shared a common language. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was partially supported in both groups.

5.2 *Shared Vision and KSB*

Correlation analysis was first used to examine the bivariate relationship between *shared vision* and KSB (Table 5). MRA was then used to examine the relationship between *shared vision* and

knowledge sharing behavior, while taking into account the effect of the other independent variables. Table 6 shows the results of the MRA of KSB on *shared vision* and other independent variables. MRA was repeated for willingness to share and use *each* type of knowledge (i.e. explicit and tacit) as a DV. This allowed the examination of the effect of shared vision on each type of knowledge.

	Group 1		Group 2	
KSB DVs	Correlation	N	Correlation	N
WSO	0.557***	257	0.310***	254
WSE	0.463***	260	0.279***	256
WST	0.553***	257	0.285***	256
WUO	0.511***	256	0.439***	254
WUE	0.440***	260	0.301***	259
WUT	0.499***	259	0.451***	255
PRUK	0.631***	255	0.209***	256

Table 5 Correlations between Shared Language and KSB (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

	Beta for Shared Vision only	T	N	Model Adj. R^2	Model F	Model Sig.
Group 1						
WSO	.240*	3.106	189	0.424	12.540	0
WSE	.153	1.851	192	0.329	8.789	0
WST	.260***	3.293	189	0.399	11.384	0
WUO	.265**	3.169	188	0.316	8.185	0
WUE	0.072	0.846	192	0.288	7.444	0
WUT	.282***	3.358	190	0.298	7.674	0
PRUK	.385***	5.049	189	0.434	13.030	0
Group 2						
WSO	.222**	2.796	189	0.203	4.996	0
WSE	.165*	2.064	191	0.177	4.416	0
WST	.227**	2.825	189	0.186	4.574	0
WUO	.312***	4.031	186	0.277	6.896	0
WUE	0.128	1.618	191	0.215	5.328	0
WUT	.348***	4.483	187	0.266	6.613	0
PRUK	-0.082	-1.065	189	0.247	6.151	0

Table 6 Regression of KSB on Shared Vision and Other IVs (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001)

Overall, MRA indicated that respondents had a higher *WSO* (consisting primarily of tacit knowledge) and higher *WUO* (also consisting primarily of tacit knowledge) with those positive referents that they felt they shared a vision with. More s*hared vision* between respondents and positive referents also related to a higher perception that the knowledge received from those co-workers was useful. Similarly, for negative referents, respondents had a higher willingness to share (both explicit and tacit) knowledge with individuals they felt they shared a vision with. Higher shared vision between respondents and negative referents also related to a higher *WUO* (consisting primarily of tacit knowledge). Therefore, hypothesis 2 was partially supported in both groups.

6.Discussion

6.1 *Shared language and KSB*

It was expected that higher levels of knowledge sharing behavior would be found among those individuals who shared a language. Positive referents results partially supported the hypotheses, showing that shared language was significantly positively related to a respondent's willingness to share (both explicit and tacit) knowledge but not significantly related to a respondent's willingness to use knowledge or a respondent's perception that the knowledge they received from positive referents was useful.

Using previous studies, various reasons may be extracted to explain shared language's positive effect on willingness to share knowledge. Shared language may have provided reassurance for the respondent that their time would not be wasted since they shared a domain with the co-worker (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Nonaka, 1994) or that the co-worker would be able to better interpret the knowledge (Henderson, 2005; Zenger and Lawrence, 1989). In a legal setting, it is also possible for shared language to be instrumental in providing access to knowledge sharing opportunities. For example, shared language may be a necessary prerequisite for knowledge sharing to take place, especially within a specific legal practice area (e.g. intellectual property, maritime law). Respondents may have been less willing to share knowledge with those outside of their practice group (i.e. those they did not share a language with) because they felt it was a waste of time or because they lacked access (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

However, a reason for the lack of relationship between shared language and willingness to use knowledge was unclear. One reason may be explained by Hoe and McShane (2002) who found shared vision to be a strong predictor for informal knowledge sharing, but not at all associated with informal knowledge acquisition (a construct similar in nature to willingness to use knowledge). The authors (2002) suggested that this may be because "informal knowledge acquisition is a more passive or natural activity whereas informal knowledge dissemination requires more active motivation guided by shared vision" (p. 289). Similarly, one may argue that informal knowledge sharing behavior, guided by shared language, also requires more active motivation (as compared to knowledge use behavior).

The absence of a relationship between shared language and PRUK was difficult to explain, since it may be expected that the respondents felt that shared language was a necessary prerequisite for inclusion in a legal practice, on a legal team, or on a legal matter. Assuming this was the case, each respondent may have gone into new projects feeling that their co-workers shared a common language with them, by virtue of inclusion on the project. However, as evidenced by the results, sharing a language was not a precondition to knowledge sharing, in this setting. Further research would be required to explore this relationship in more detail.

For the most part, the results from negative referents mimicked those with positive referents, with one notable exception: shared language was no longer related to *WSO*. When willingness to share explicit and tacit knowledge were analyzed, there was a significant positive relationship between shared language and *WSE* and none between shared language and *WST*. This suggested that even when respondents felt there was not a good working relationship between them and co-workers, they were still willing to share explicit forms of knowledge, if they shared a language. This would confirm earlier speculation as to the effect of participation in a domain specific legal practice. More interestingly, with negative referents, respondents were no longer willing to share tacit knowledge, suggesting that they were no longer interested in investing extra time and effort needed to transfer tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). The results from the second group suggested that shared language may not be a sufficient precondition for the sharing of knowledge with negative referents, especially tacit knowledge.

6.2 *Shared vision and KSB*

As predicted, in Group 1, significant positive relationships were found between shared vision and all three KSBs (i.e. *WSO, WUO,* and *PRUK*). These findings highlighted the important role shared vision played in the knowledge sharing process and were consistent with previous researchers.

One interesting discovery became apparent after repeating MRA for each knowledge type. In Group 1, the relationships between shared vision and *WSO/WUO* primarily consisted of a willingness to share and use *tacit* knowledge. In fact, when shared vision was analyzed with *WSE* and *WUE*, no significant relationships were found; an important finding since tacit knowledge is routinely known as being difficult to transfer. These results showed that the sharing of values or goals may be necessary pre-conditions to transfer tacit knowledge and built on the work of Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) in demonstrating that shared vision among co-workers leads to more meaningful, quality exchanges (i.e. the transference of tacit knowledge).

With negative referents, shared vision was also positively related to *WSO* and *WUO*. However, after repeating MRA for the two types of knowledge *WSE* was now significantly related to shared vision along with *WST* and *WUT*. However, *WUE* was still not found to be related. These findings with negative referents, for the most part, confirmed those with positive referents and perhaps even highlighted a more complete effect of shared vision on KSB.

Interestingly, of all the variables tested in the first group, shared vision had the strongest effect on *PRUK*. However, in Group 2, shared vision had no effect on *PRUK*. One possible suggestion may be because respondents could not get past the nature of the poor working relationship and generally saw a majority of knowledge from negative referents as not useful, even if they happened to share a common vision.

7.Conclusion

Overall, the analysis showed that having a shared perspective had a positive effect on KSB. As expected, the results showed a positive relationship between shared perspective and willingness to share knowledge in both groups; where higher shared language *or* shared vision led to higher willingness by the respondent to share knowledge, regardless of working relationships. The results also found a positive effect of shared vision on willingness to use knowledge, in both groups. Surprisingly, no significant relationships were found between shared language and willingness to use knowledge in either group.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the effect of shared vision on PRUK. The results for the first group suggested that having a shared vision led to a significantly higher perception that the knowledge received from co-workers was useful. However, shared vision did not remain a significant influence in Group 2, where the working relationship was deemed poor. This suggested a need to explore the effect of working relationships in further research. Finally, shared language was not found to influence *PRUK* in either group.

This paper is a subset of a more extensive study that will be extended in future work to explore other aspects of knowledge sharing behavior not covered here.

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