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Recent Research

When Knowledge Sharing Turns to Knowledge Hiding

Employees balk at requests for information out of distrust — or worse.

Title: Knowledge Hiding in Organizations (Subscription or fee required.)

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Why don't companies investing in knowledge-transfer software see more of an improvement in their information flow? One big reason, according to this paper, is that some employees simply won't share what they know. Often, they balk because they don't trust their colleagues and they want to protect their own interests or those of their company. Other times, the motivation is more personal: Employees want to undermine or retaliate against a co-worker.

The researchers dub this newfound phenomenon "knowledge hiding." In contrast with knowledge hoarding, which is the accumulation of information that may or may not be shared at a later date, hiding is "an intentional concealment of knowledge requested by another [individual]." The authors conducted several studies to confirm evidence of knowledge hiding and to identify ways to predict when it will occur. In addition, they provide companies with strategies to keep information flowing.

Some situations involve overt deception, such as when a co-worker provides part, but not all, of the requested information. In other situations, knowledge hiding takes the form of a "white lie" — employees could be concealing knowledge to protect a co-worker's feelings or reputation, to preserve confidentiality, or to guard a third party's interests.

In the first study, 35 employees at a Canadian financial-services firm completed a daily survey for a week that logged their responses to internal requests for information. They were asked whether they shared or hid information and the extent to which they distrusted the individual making the request. Of the 113 knowledge-transfer "events" that were logged, slightly more than 10 percent were identified as instances of knowledge hiding — a significant number because people tend to underreport such actions, according to the researchers.

In a second study, at companies in the manufacturing and education sectors, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 11 employees in a range of jobs, including engineers, project managers, and clerical workers. They, too, were asked to describe examples of knowledge transfer or withholding; they were also asked to evaluate their relationships with co-workers. The researchers found that the more employees distrusted the person requesting the information, the more likely they were to hide knowledge from that person.

In the next study, 194 employees representing a wide variety of organizations, ages, experience, and education levels completed a questionnaire about their experiences with knowledge transfer. Slightly more than half of the participants were from the United States, 11 percent were Canadian, and the rest were from other countries. Managers made up 36 percent of the sample, which included employees from administration, sales, and

information technology.

An analysis of the data from the questionnaire revealed three approaches that employees use to hide knowledge. The first, *playing dumb*, occurs when employees pretend not to have the requested information. The second, *being evasive*, describes a situation in which an employee provides incorrect information or falsely promises to give a complete answer later. Employees taking the third approach, *rationalized hiding*, offer a justification for balking, suggesting that they aren't allowed to provide the information or blaming another party.

The final study, a survey of 105 Canadian undergraduate business students with work experience, showed that the type of knowledge being sought helped determine which approach was used to conceal it. When the information requested was complicated, employees were more likely to use evasive hiding, offering the excuse that the complex, intricate details couldn't be properly explained at that moment. It is ineffective to play dumb or to rationalize when the requested knowledge is straightforward. When those surveyed were asked for specific job-related knowledge (for instance, "How should I do this task?"), they were more likely to engage in evasive hiding, because it's easier to duck a simple question than provide a rationale for not answering it.

The organization's climate also affects employees' knowledge-sharing decisions, the researchers found. In companies with stronger knowledge-sharing cultures, employees were less likely to engage in evasive hiding, the most deceptive and least socially acceptable tactic. (In contrast, rationalized hiding allows employees to preserve their relationships with co-workers by saying, for example, "I'd like to tell you, but I'm not supposed to.")

Managers who wish to curtail knowledge hiding have several options, the researchers suggest. To increase staff members' perceptions of their colleagues' trustworthiness, managers can emphasize a shared identity or publicly highlight instances when an employee followed through on a promise. Managers should also try to encourage direct contact between employees and to discourage a reliance on e-mail communication. It's also important to not offer incentives for employees to "betray" their co-workers; for instance, salespeople shouldn't be rewarded for poaching one another's clients.

Managers should also voice their support for knowledge sharing, the authors conclude. When instances of knowledge hiding are detected, managers should act quickly before the habits become entrenched.

"A lot of companies have jumped on the bandwagon of knowledge sharing" by investing heavily in software, according to one of the authors, David Zweig. "It was a case of, 'If you build it, they will come.' But they didn't come.... If you don't work on creating that climate and establishing trust, it doesn't matter how great the software is, people aren't going to use it."

Bottom Line:
Although companies have increasingly invested in knowledge-sharing software, employees sometimes undermine the effort by deliberately concealing information from their co-workers. The culture of the organization and the level of distrust among employees are key factors in determining whether and how employees hide what they know.