

***Disabling the Context for Knowledge Work –
The Role of Managers' Behaviours***

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Abstract

Research paper.

Purpose; *to analyse issues that prevent knowledge sharing in organisations.*

Approach; *Content analysis of 691 free text comments about the climate for knowledge sharing provided by 848 employees, primarily knowledge workers, in 92 business units and departments.*

Findings; *Two main issues that prevent knowledge sharing are the attitudes of the nearest supervisor and a lack of context-building information. Apathetic managers, who do not actively encourage business/organisational information, and hypocritical managers, who do not 'walk the talk', are the main management behaviours that prevent knowledge sharing according to their subordinates in the sample. The study also suggests that a lack of organisational context-building information and knowledge impacts the context negatively and makes knowledge workers less prone to share knowledge also in their work groups.*

Research implications; *Context-building knowledge and information have been largely ignored in the knowledge sharing literature. Also, non-managers tend not to be targeted as respondents in studies on knowledge sharing. The study suggests that managers' apathy should be considered a disabling behaviour with regard to context.*

Practical implications; *The silo walls in organisations are built of apathy. Few managers actively prevent or resist sharing of knowledge. However, knowledge sharing requires enabling management behaviours. Sharing business/organisational information not related to tasks communicates priority and provides context necessary also for sharing in the work groups.*

Limitations; *The sample is too small to draw conclusions valid beyond the sample organisations. Respondents in the sample are primarily non-managers in Europe and Australia.*

Key words: knowledge sharing; knowledge work; collaborative climate; context-building knowledge and information; apathy; management behaviour.

Introduction

In 1992 James B.Quinn identified the sharing of knowledge as a crucial value-driver in organisations because of its unique characteristic compared to other assets of a firm: it grows most – and usually exponentially – when shared. Fifteen years later there is wide-spread agreement on the importance of knowledge in organisations, (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995, Riege 2005, Dixon 2000, Sullivan 2000) and an entire research discipline collected under the somewhat misleading name 'knowledge management' has been born. Given the high value-potential it is little wonder that the study of

knowledge sharing practices has become one of the most researched fields within KM and this paper contributes to the growing field of studies with a managerial focus on this issue.

Despite the attention, little has been achieved in practice. Knowledge sharing has become one of those practices with a high value in theory, but with considerable problems to achieve in practice. Why? One clue comes from practitioners. Executives repeatedly cite the 'internal culture' of resistance to sharing as the hardest barrier to overcome in implementation of KM. In a Conference Board report by Hackett (2000) managers identified the major obstacles to implementing KM. The second biggest hurdle was 'a culture of hoarding knowledge'.

The culture is where the surveyed managers believed the best opportunities for improvement were to be found in the five years to come. However, after eight years very little has been achieved. This article explores reasons why knowledge sharing is so hard to achieve in practice and discusses alternative theoretical and methodological research approaches.

Theoretical background

One stream of research with a managerial focus discusses processes that improve knowledge sharing and include Dixon (2000), who suggests five organisational interventions depending on the nature of knowledge; Hansen & Oetinger (2001) better leadership practices, and; Schlegelmilch & Chini (2003) knowledge transfer methods. Numerous studies have confirmed the importance of encouraging management support; Cabrera & Cabrera (2005) cite several in their overview of management practices which support knowledge sharing. Zarraga's and Bonache's (2003) study of self-managed work teams, for instance, shows that an involved team leader is the principal factor favouring mutual trust in a climate characterised by 'high care'. Also MacNeil's (2004) theoretical paper argues that supervisors play an important role as facilitators of knowledge sharing processes.

This stream also discusses knowledge sharing in terms of what motivates employees to share. Unsurprisingly, Burgess (2005) finds that employees, who perceived greater

organizational rewards for sharing, spent more hours sharing knowledge beyond their immediate work group. In contrast, employees who perceived knowledge as a means of achieving upward organizational mobility were less likely to share and somewhat more likely to seek information. Ajzen & Fischbein's (1980) theories of reasoned action and theory of planned behaviour have been used by several authors, Cabrera & Cabrera (2005), Lin & Lee (2004) and Bock, Zmud & Lee (2005) among them. Lin & Lee find that the encouraging intentions of senior managers in Taiwan influences knowledge sharing behaviour among managers and Bock, Zmud & Lee (2002) contribute to the constant debate about whether extrinsic rewards influence knowledge sharing. They find that knowledge sharing intentions among Korean managers are negatively correlated with extrinsic rewards. Chowdury (2005) suggests that trust is crucial and that trust must be developed between every member of a team for knowledge sharing to happen. Also HR practices have been suggested to have a positive influence on desired knowledge sharing behaviours by Currie & Kerrine (2003) in a theoretical paper.

Another group of authors have discussed issues that obstruct knowledge sharing. In his overview over literature about knowledge sharing, Riege (2005) describes in total 39 issues (called barriers) identified by a large number of authors. He distinguishes between *organisational* (14), *individual* (17) and *technology* (8) issues. The organisational issues in Riege's list are related to organisational context; also some of those he classifies as individual, such as lack of leadership and managerial direction, while use of position-based status and intolerance of mistakes are management behaviours. None of the technology barriers he identified seem directly related to behaviours. The diversity of respondents and concepts and small numbers of interviewees in the empirical studies has not allowed Riege or the original authors to rank the issues in terms of frequency or importance.

Although various conceptualisations of knowledge are discussed and defined, authors in the management stream have tended to regard the value of knowledge as impersonal and as an object; contained in stock (Gupta & Govindarajan 2000, Foss & Pedersen 2002), derived from its form or content (Szulanski 1996, Dixon 2000, Schlegelmilch & Chini 2003) or as objects implicitly defined by the choice of variables for statistical analysis (Cummings 2004, Hansen 2002, Hansen & al. 2005, Tsai 2001, Simonin 1999).

Szulanski's (1996) concept of 'stickiness' as a feature of knowledge has been influential. He discusses how it influences the sharing of complex knowledge, such as best practices. Empson (2001) highlights the flaw of this approach in her analysis of impediments to knowledge transfers in mergers of six professional services firms. She concludes that the knowledge workers in the merging firms determined their perception of the relative value of knowledge by the perceived *differences* in the form of knowledge rather than simply the form or the content of the knowledge.

The conceptualisation of knowledge as an object has been heavily criticised by many other authors, among them Leonard-Barton (1995), Alvesson (2004), Allee (1997) and Davenport & Prusak (1998). Alternatives have been explored. Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) and Sveiby (1997) suggest an alternative ontology and epistemology based on Polanyi (1958). Polanyi's argument is that knowledge is constructed in a social context and that it cannot be separated from the individual and context; it combines the knower and the known. Knowledge can be understood as "a capacity to act in a context" Sveiby (1997) or "justified true belief" (Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995)). Central in both concepts is also a distinction between information and knowledge (Sveiby 1997) or between explicit and tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995). One important management principle derived from this view on knowledge is that it is fruitless to try to "manage" knowledge per se. Managerial efforts should instead be directed toward the context where knowledge is created (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and shared and applied (Sveiby 1997). Stein & Ridderstråle (2001) also uses Polanyi to discuss strategies to deal with transfer problems.

Studies focusing on context have been undertaken, notably based on the concepts of culture and climate. Originally an anthropological concept, culture has been popular in organisation studies since the early 1980s and Edgar Schein's (1995) distinction of three levels in organisational culture has gained considerable influence. Schein (1999) calls them, *basic underlying assumptions* at the deepest level; a middle level of *espoused values* (such as strategies goals and justifications); and a superficial level, *artefacts*, the visible organisational structures, behaviours and processes. De Long & Fahey (2000) have studied how organisational culture influences the desirable behaviours central to knowledge creation, sharing, and use and find that the ability and

willingness to learn from mistakes are central to best practice transfer. Also Husted and Michailova (2002) and Ford and Chan (2003) have shown how national cultures can be major influencing factors on knowledge sharing.

The existence of different levels of organisational culture is widely acknowledged today. However, research based on the concept has been hampered by several problems. One is the lack of consensus about definitions. Scholars agree that culture is something holistic and historically determined; it is socially constructed, soft and difficult to change. But then opinions diverge. Although both practitioners and scholars agree that culture is crucial in understanding organisations, these problems have tended to marginalise the research implications of the concept. An alternative to culture is the concept of climate. This paper does not enter the vigorous debate about the pros and cons of the two concepts, but takes Dennison's (1996) view that the distinction is not one of substance, but one of perspective. Climate can be seen as Schein's superficial (artefact) level of a culture. Ekvall (1990), in his studies on what characterises an innovative climate, defines climate as 'the behaviours, attitudes and atmosphere that characterise the life in an organisation', i.e. Schein's artefact level.

Culture and climate are Western concepts and Nonaka & Konno (1998) have suggested the Japanese philosopher Nishida's concept of "ba" as an alternative, by Nishida defined as the "shared space for emerging relationships". In their adaptation for understanding innovation and knowledge creation they define ba as the "context which harbours meaning", and in later refinements of the theory: the "enabling context" (von Krogh, Ichijo, Nonaka 2000) and "shared context in motion" (Peltokorpi V., Nonaka I., Kodama M., 2007).

Sveiby & Simons (2002) have suggested that an organisation's context for knowledge sharing, called collaborative climate, can be seen as the shared mental space, where knowledge sharing and creation take place. Behaviours, attitudes and atmosphere that characterise the life in this mental space are perceived by the knowers and become elements in the knowledge assimilated (Polanyi 1958) by them. The space can be divided in levels: the individual him/herself, the work group that forms the nearest context of the individuals and the organisation that forms the context of the workgroups.

This distinction is found also in the Ba-concept, where individuals form the ba of the work groups, which form the ba of the organisation.

Early in the empirical development of the collaborative climate concept immediate supervisors were identified as major influencers of context, confirming that middle managers have key role as “middle-up-down” connectors (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and builders of knowledge worker commitment (Thompson 2005). Because of their double role as actors on two levels of context simultaneously supervisors are able to give contextual meaning to events, and in so doing contribute to development of shared norms and values (Peltokorpi V., Nonaka I., Kodama M., 2007). The ba concept is an element in a theory of knowledge creation and has been empirically studied primarily in conjunction with innovation processes where the focus has been on individual cognition in a work group context (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1997, Dyck et al., 2005; Schulze and Hoegl, 2006).

This paper focuses on the more mundane world of routine work, which dominates most working days of knowledge workers, who interact both in their work group contexts and in the larger organisational context. For this purpose it is necessary to make a distinction between two families (Wittgenstein 1995) of mutually overlapping forms of information and knowledge: task-oriented and context-building.

Task-oriented information/knowledge on work group level is primarily technical in nature and is required to accomplish the tasks at hand. An individual's capacity to act with regard to their tasks is applied and developed through interactions in a work group context and sharing/applying task-oriented knowledge and information. Context-building information and knowledge on the work group level is required to understand how one's knowledge relates to that of the other members of the work group. Context-building knowledge and information also carry the norms of one's nearest knowledge-providing network of colleagues in the group;.

Access to organisational context-building information and knowledge is required in order to relate to the organisation beyond one's immediate work group. According to the ba-theory top executives and immediate supervisors are important conveyors and

interpreters of both organisation-related knowledge and information meaning, which form the organisational context. Senior executives are important actors in the organisational context; they articulate and communicate vision, mission and strategy and thus provide the guiding context for common agreement on objectives with other managers, work groups and individual knowledge workers. A high level of alignment is crucial in organisations, where knowledge workers have to exercise judgement, such as knowledge-intensive firms (Alvesson 2004) and requires rich context-building knowledge and information. Organisational contexts with higher goals than just maximising shareholder wealth distinguish companies that last in the long run (Collins & Perras 1997).

A bit simplistically, one might say that task-oriented knowledge and information answer the question 'how' to perform the tasks, while context-building knowledge and information answer the question 'why'; why we are doing our job in a certain way, how one's work group's goals are related to the goals of the whole organisation and the relevance of one's work in general. The immediate supervisors/middle managers generally have access to most levels of official context-building knowledge and information, while non-managers often are dependent on their supervisors to provide it from outside their own working environment. This is what gives managers their unique role as builders of the context where knowledge sharing/creation take place.

Data, Method and Research Questions

Empirical studies on knowledge sharing tend to be designed as hypothesis testing. The questionnaires are derived from theory and managers are respondents and interviewees (Szulanski 1996, Burgess 2005, Hansen 2002, Hansen & al. 2005, Bock, Zmud & Lee 2005, Lin & Lee 2004). Some have surveyed adult students (Chowdhury 2005, Wang 2004) or undergraduate students (Miller & Karakowsky 2005) to test hypotheses. The survey results are then analysed with statistical methods.

There are several problems with such a methodology; one is that questionnaires rely on predetermined questions; another is that students are outsiders. A crucial problem is that managers are powerful influencers of the context of their subordinates. Hence, the

validity of such studies can be questioned, because the results may not be representative of the context as experienced by the majority of employees in organisations.

Data for this study come from a sample of free text comments entered by respondents when they fill in the Collaborative Climate Survey. A selection of 92 business units and departments in 12 companies and government organisations was made comprising a total of 2988 respondents. The majority of the respondents to the collaborative climate survey (approx. 85%) are non-managers. This makes their free text comments relevant for studying both how the behaviours of executives and managers enable or disable the context for knowledge sharing and how knowledge workers share knowledge with each other in work groups and between work groups.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents work in professional services units and government departments (91 of 92 units), as experts, sales consultants of high-tech services or civil servants, i.e. they are what is commonly referred to as 'knowledge workers'. Pyöriä, Melin, Blom (2005. p.89) define knowledge workers as people, who use IT, have minimum intermediate vocational training and/or education and they are allowed independent design of important aspects of their job. The texts in the sample describe perceptions made by knowledge workers on all levels looking 'upwards' (subordinate view) and 'sideways' (peer view) during normal working days. The authors of the texts are commenting about their everyday working life in their organisations; they are referring to what they perceive are preventing them from doing their routine work properly. Much of their work is done in project form, but they are generally not engaged in new product development.

Since most respondents are non-managers, most of the responses about management behaviours refer to team/work group leaders, a.k.a. supervisors or front-line managers. A work group is defined as the team or group in which the respondents perform most of their daily work; hence it may be a team on the lowest level or (rarely) a management team, depending on the position of the respondent.

Age Distribution		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	<30 years	684	22,6	31,8
	31-40 years	653	21,9	30,3
	41-50 years	528	17,7	24,5
	>50 years	291	9,7	13,5
	Total	2156	72,2	100,0
Missing		832	27,8	
Total		2988	100	

Table 1. Age distribution of the respondents in the study.

The selection from surveys collected during the period 2001-2005, was stratified to include small and big organisations, both public and private from several countries. The organisations are from: Private sector: 48%. Public sector 52%. Male approx. 64%, Female approx. 36%. Managers approx. 15%, Non-managers approx 85%. (Manager = person with subordinates). A description of the sample is found in table 2.

Organi-sation	Total # Respond.	w. comment	Relevant comments	Percent relevant	# of units in sample	Type of activity	Country
ITserv	241	27	27	11 %	4	IT services in large manufacturing company	Sweden
Govag	117	72	55	47 %	12	Government agency	Canada
Govdept	445	102	81	18 %	9	Government department	Australia
Accon	875	215	204	23 %	17	Partner owned accounting firm	Australia
Engcon	86	17	14	16 %	12	Engineering consulting company	UK
Hrcon	27	9	9	33 %	2	HR consulting firm	Finland
Salecom	34	4	4	12 %	4	Sales department in tele com company	Finland
Telcom	167	48	47	28 %	15	Sales department in telcompany	Europe
Govtrpt	615	243	144	23 %	9	Government Transport utility	Australia
Goveng	245	53	52	21 %	5	Government engineering consulting	Finland
Goveny	122	52	49	40 %	2	Government energy distribution	Europe/US
Mgcon	14	6	5	36 %	1	Partner owned consulting firm	Australia
TOTAL	2988	848	691	23 %	92		

Table 2. Description of the organisations in the study.

848 respondents had entered free text comments (28% of all respondents); after excluding comments about the survey design and those that only contained the words 'no comment' or similar the 691 remaining and relevant comments (23%) were coded in two phases using NVivo qualitative analysis software.

A major benefit of free text entries is that the respondents have not been bound by a questionnaire structure. Their free reflections and spontaneous comments may thus cover any issues that come to mind while they are filling in the questionnaire. Another benefit is that, unlike interview situations, the respondents do not have to reveal their opinions to a person; under protection of anonymity their comments therefore can be compared to self-reflections. The respondents are not completely free, however. The context 'knowledge sharing' is clear from the questionnaire and the texts also mainly reflect this.

The free text comments had not been analysed in detail before, so it was decided to use this as an opportunity. The first coding can therefore be described as a 'grounded theory-inspired' approach, meaning that the data were approached in an exploratory way, without an opinion about where they would lead the researcher. At this stage the focus of the paper was undetermined; no literature study had been undertaken and no attempt had been made to formulate research question(s).

Many respondents had entered multiple opinions, ideas, reflections and suggestions in their texts, so the first coding yielded 905 individually coded text passages. Most of the text passages, 695 or 76.8%, reflect negative opinions; only 95 (10.5%) can be regarded as positive while 115 (12.7%) are neutral.

It is known from attitude surveys that unhappy respondents tend to be more vocal than happy ones. This was confirmed by a t-test. There is an overall tendency to be more negative among those, who enter comments in the sample (table 3), but the hypothesis was supported for only four of the twelve organisations: Govag, Accon, Govtrpt and Goveng. Three of the four are large government agencies or utilities. It was shown by Sveiby & Simons (2002) that government employees tend to harbour more negative

perceptions than employees of private companies, so the sample follows the general tendency in the database (n=8 277).

Hypothesis: Respondents entering comments are more negative about CC than those that do not comment.

	t-test for Equality of Means								Hypothesis supported
	Levene's test for equal Variances	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Interval Difference Lower	Upper	
Itserv	Equal	0,777	239,0	0,438	0,10	0,13	-0,15	0,35	No
Govag	Not equal	-2,654	115,0	0,009	-0,32	0,12	-0,55	-0,08	Yes
Govdept	Equal	-0,651	443,0	0,515	-1,25	1,92	-5,01	2,52	No
Accon	Not equal	-2,030	310,9	0,043	-2,81	1,39	-5,54	-0,09	Yes
Engcon	Not equal	-0,330	20,6	0,745	-0,06	0,18	-0,44	0,32	No
Salecom	Equal	0,091	32,0	0,928	0,03	0,27	-0,53	0,58	No
Telcom	Equal	-0,065	165,0	0,948	-0,18	2,75	-5,60	5,24	No
Govtrpt	Not equal	-3,601	367,3	0,000	-5,56	1,55	-8,60	-2,53	Yes
Goveng	Not equal	-2,519	72,6	0,014	-7,56	3,00	-13,54	-1,58	Yes
Goveny	Equal	0,686	120,0	0,494	1,91	2,78	-3,60	7,42	No
Mgcon	Equal	-2,083	12,0	0,059	-14,84	7,13	-30,37	0,68	No

Table 3. A negative tendency can be detected among respondents in 9 of 12 companies, 4 of which are significant.

Could the respondents, who enter comments, belong to an alienated minority? Two circumstances point against such a conclusion. One is that there are only 11 comments (1.5%) in the sample suggestive of alienation, such as conspiracy theorising or accusations against colleagues. Another is that the number of people entering comments is too large to be called a minority; ranging between 21% and 47% in the four companies and 23% in the sample as a whole (see table 3.).

Comments tend to be either negative or positive. More than half (57%) of the 95 positive comments in the sample are referrals to a well-functioning workgroup. Also comments that display a positive own attitude towards knowledge sharing (14%) and comments about the situation improving (12%) were classified as positive. Half of those perceiving that the situation is improving also contain a negative element.

Suggestions make up 34% of the 115 neutral comments, often in conjunction with a negative comment about a phenomenon or behaviour. There is also a group (13%), who

claim that the climate in their own workgroup is fine, but they believe or have heard that the climate is not as good in other parts of the organisation.

The texts show what those, who are dissatisfied with the context for of knowledge sharing, perceive as the main issues. They are perceptions, i.e. they reach only the surface level of culture. The fact that a majority of survey respondents are more positive than those who authored the comments, reduces the overall validity of this study; one cannot draw the conclusion that contexts for knowledge sharing in organisations in general are as poor as the authors claim. However, there is no reason to suspect that the critique raised is invalid as such, or that the identified issues do not exist. On the contrary, the data are a good source for identifying and exploring perceptions of issues that disable knowledge sharing in general.

A second coding was therefore undertaken; this time with the research questions in mind:

What issues that disable knowledge sharing can be identified?

and the sub-questions:

- **What behavioural issues can be identified?**
- **What level(s) of contexts are these issues related to?**
- **Which identified issues and behaviours are most frequent?**

Findings

The second coding yielded 91 issues that influence knowledge sharing negatively as identified by the respondents, ranging from “Silo mentality” to “Corruption” (!).

A high proportion of the issues refer to management behaviours (or lack thereof) and context, see table 4. 54 negative comments referring to 7 different IT-related problems were mentioned, summarised they make up 7.8% of all negative comments. Also 53 comments referring to 6 different issues related to top executives were summarised as 7.6%. The table is of course influenced by the perspective of the respondents as the majority is positioned at the bottom of the power pyramid.

Rank	Issue that disables knowledge sharing	Percent of negative	Type of issue
1	“Silo mentality”	11.1 %	Organisational
2	All technology-related issues	7.8 %	Technology
3	Apathetic top executives	7.6%	Management behaviour
4	“Knowledge is power”	6.0 %	Staff / Management behaviour
5	No formal processes or procedures for sharing	5.0 %	Organisational/management behaviour
6	Lack of time	4.5 %	Organisational/Management behaviour
7	Managers “not walking the talk”	3.7 %	Management behaviour
8	Lack of encouragement from managers	3.0 %	Management behaviour
9	Bureaucratic procedures	2.3 %	Organisational
10	Managers resistant to change	1.9 %	Management behaviour

Table 4. The ten most common issues that disable knowledge sharing.

The three most frequently mentioned issues are: a ‘silo mentality’ (11.1%) that disable knowledge sharing between work groups/unit, technology problems (7.8%), and senior managers, who do not communicate with the lower ranks or do not give direction or vision (7.6%). Issues that directly disable sharing from the bottom-up are rarely mentioned in the data material; only 4% mention issues such as managers who perceive questions as threatening and even one case of a perceived corrupt manager.

The 905 texts were also coded in two levels of context: Work group and Organisation; one class referring to the individual him/herself; one referring to the immediate supervisor, and; one class of IT-issues, see Table 5. Furthermore the comments were classified as negative, neutral or positive. 14 comments remained unclassifiable in this coding.

Comments	Organi- sation	Work group	Indi- vidual	Super- visor	IT- issues	Unclas- sified	Total	Percent
# negative	357	135	18	125	54	6	695	76.8%
# neutral	24	59	9	13	2	8	115	12.7%
# positive	15	56	13	10	1	0	95	10.5%
Total	396	250	40	148	57	14	905	100%
Percentages	43.8%	27.6%	4.4%	16.4%	6.3%	1.5%	100%	
% negative	90.2%	54.0%	45.0%	84.5%	94.7%	42.9%	76.8%	
% neutral	6.1%	23.6%	22.5%	8.8%	3.5%	57.1%	12.7%	
% positive	3.8%	22.4%	32.5%	6.8%	1.8%	0.0%	10.5%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	

Table 5. The texts coded according to type of context they refer to.

Most comments (43.8%) refer to the organisational context outside one's own work group and they are predominantly negative (90.2%) in nature. Also one's nearest manager/supervisor receives scathing scores; 84.5% of the comments concerning supervisors' knowledge sharing behaviour are negative. IT-issues are not as frequently commented upon (6.3%), and then in negative (94.7) terms. The comments regarding the workgroup context are second most frequent (27.6% of total) and more balanced with neutral and positive comments almost equalling the negative ones.

Issue	Percent of total negative in class	
Work group context		
Lack of time	23.0%	
Knowledge is power	11.9%	
Information on need-to-know basis only	8.9%	
No formal processes for sharing	8.9%	
Sharing happens only in the projects	6.7%	
Support staff poorly informed	5.2%	64.4%
Total negative Work group context	135	
Supervisor behaviour		
Managers not walking the talk	20.8%	
Lack of encouragement from management	16.8%	
Managers resistant to change	10.4%	
Opposition not encouraged by managers	8.0%	
Managers - staff treated differently	7.2%	
Managers unwilling to take risks	5.6%	68.8%
Total negative Supervisor	125	
Organisational context		
Silo mentality	21.6%	
Apathetic top executives	7.6%	
Knowledge is Power	5.6%	
No formal processes for sharing	3.4%	
Bureaucratic procedures	4.5%	
Information overload	3.4%	
Retirees disappear with the knowledge	3.4%	
Experience is not valued	3.1%	52.4%
Total negative Organisational context	357	

Table 6. Most commonly mentioned context disabling issues.

Only few comments (4.4%) were classified as individual attitude, with those expressing a positive attitude towards learning from others the most common, (13 texts). The 18 negative individual texts include those that suggest alienation and resigned attitudes and

are therefore of less interest for the purpose of this article. See table 6, which covers the most common issues.

The most frequently mentioned criticism concerning workgroup context is a perceived lack of time to share, as a respondent in Accon writes: *There is too much pressure on production to spend time sharing knowledge and skills.* A high focus in many work groups on task-oriented knowledge could be the reason for frequent complaints that sharing takes place in projects only. Time pressure and task-orientation could be the reason also for complaints about some managers applying a 'need-to-know' basis only. Support staff seems particularly vulnerable in this respect and may perceive lack of knowledge sharing as an intention to separate managers and staff. What is appreciated in the work groups are an egalitarian atmosphere, *that everyone pitches in* (female > 50 years in support role), while people who keep knowledge and information to themselves for competitive reasons are resented. The underlying reason for such 'knowledge is power' behaviour in the work groups is perceived *to distinguish themselves from the pack*, as a young new recruit in Accon puts it, or fear; as expressed by a manager with more than 20 years employment in Govtrpt, which was shedding staff at the time of the survey: *With the current climate of "retrenchments" I know of information/Knowledge hoarders that are trying to make themselves indispensable or at least valuable to others.*

As can be seen from table 6, some of the issues coded as work group context depend on, or could even have been coded as, supervisor behaviour. From this it becomes clear that the respondents give the supervisor a pivotal role. A woman in Govdept, (with a very low opinion about the behaviour of her current supervisor): *All depends on what the supervisor is like. Some have an ability to share, some don't – or they do have the ability, but they do not want to take the time to inform or share their experiences.*

'Lack of encouragement' is the second most common critique against supervisors and their pivotal role is reinforced by the fact that 6 of the only 10 texts in the whole sample that praise the supervisor mention it: *The support provided by my supervisor has been a great enhancement in the way I treat others within the group.* (Young man with 2 years experience in Govdept). Respondents are quite resentful about managers, who don't

walk the talk, i.e., who talk about the importance of sharing, but are perceived as unwilling to share their own information and knowledge. A we-them view can be noticed also in that quite a few staff members believe that their supervisors portion out information for power purposes to divide and rule: *I shouldn't tell you this, but...*

As regards the organisational context outside one's work group the main issue seems to be that people do not know much about it. A general 'silo mentality' is the most frequently mentioned issue in the whole sample (11.1% of all) that disables horizontal knowledge sharing between departments and business units. Respondents complain that they are not allocated time and resources to learn what people in other departments or business units are doing (no inter-departmental meetings, for instance) and that reward systems and time pressures force them to narrowly focus only on their own work environment as one engineer with more than 20 years employment in Goveny: *I have never met or conferred with my counterparts from other Business Units.*

When people outside their own unit do not know what other units are doing, people seem to seek comfort in their own nearest working environment, particularly when times get tough as an engineer in Govtrpt experiences, which was into its 3rd year of downsizing: *groups are not sharing or working with each other as they used to. Each section seems to be grimly holding on to their own information and resources so they feel they have security.*

The respondents seem to take it as a given that knowledge sharing is valuable so they vent their frustration and theorise about the reasons why *it just doesn't happen!* as a female knowledge worker in Govag cries out. Some express frustration over lost opportunities as this young accountant: *When I started with Accon I thought it would be very different to the smaller firms I had been with previously, however, we do not seem to take advantages of our resources and to me it seems like we operate as lots of smaller firms under the same name.*

The main issue that disables knowledge sharing in organisations in the sample, therefore, appears not to be a range of 'barriers' to knowledge flows or active discouragement by managers, but lack of encouragement from management or

management *apathy*. No less than 363 comments (52% of the negative, 40% of all) refer to lack of encouragement from managers or top executives and lack of even the simplest formal processes, such as staff meetings.

A more active disabling behaviour is what can be called *hypocrisy*. Managers, who are perceived not to 'walk the talk', who share only the good news and who treat non-managers and managers differently make up 7% of all negative comments and evoke resentment. An Accon accountant expresses a view shared by many: *Sharing knowledge needs to be actually encouraged by leadership rather than just talked about.*

A larger group of texts, 14%, mention even more active *resistance*, such as using knowledge for power reasons, risk aversion, resistance to change or unwillingness to listen to opposing view points. Outright *hostile* behaviours, in the sense that Husted & Michailova (2005) found among managers in Russian companies, such as managers who perceive questions as threatening, or behave corruptly, are rare in the sample (1%).

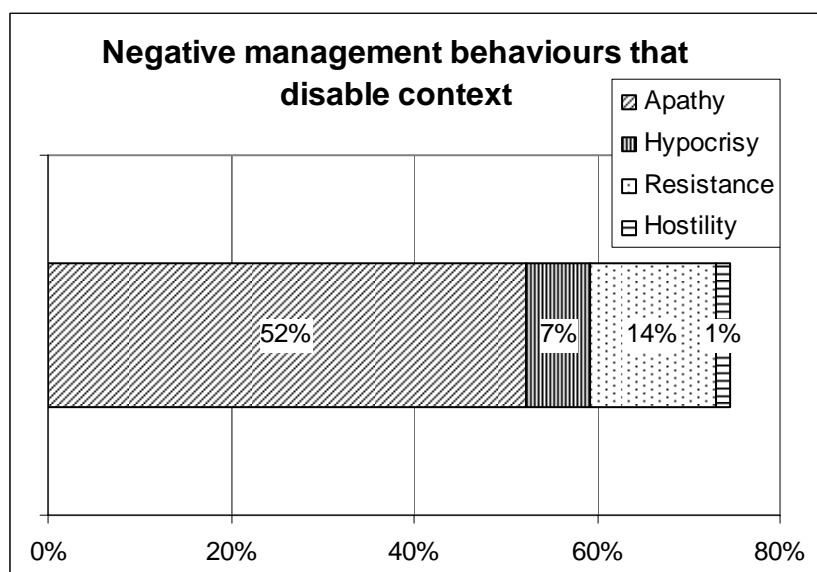


Figure 1. Four context disabling management behaviours, totalling 74% of negative comments, (57% of all comments).

Discussion, Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The two main issues preventing knowledge sharing concern the behaviours of managers and the organisational context according to the empirical data in this study. Respondents blame their managers, both the nearest supervisor and senior executives for the lack of knowledge sharing in general. Only a few managers are, however, perceived to resist or prevent knowledge sharing actively. The problem is what they do not do; managers are perceived not to share what they know and not to encourage knowledge sharing behaviours.

A common theme in the texts is that, for knowledge sharing to happen, managers must actively encourage it. To merely express generally favourable attitudes toward knowledge sharing is not enough and even resented as hypocrisy. The texts show that people perceive lack of activity, managers' apathy, as the major issue that prevents sharing of knowledge. As managers are the main conveyors of context-building information and knowledge, both issues hence refer to the context in which the knowledge workers create, share and apply knowledge.

The main conclusion is therefore that the knowledge workers of the organisations in the sample perceive a lack of organisational context. The data confirms theory that an enabling context requires both active maintenance and supporting processes. A further conclusion, supported by the data, is that ignoring the context is equivalent of disabling it. The study also suggests that lack of organisational context-building information and knowledge reduce the trust that employees feel for managers in general. This contributes to the knowledge-workers being less prone to sharing knowledge also in the work groups. So, why are managers apathetic about context-building?

An erroneous belief among senior executives that the context for sharing knowledge at lower levels is better than it is, may be one reason for the apathy. Consider what a senior executive in Engcon, who rates the overall CCI at a very high 81/100, writes:

Overall we are reasonably good but we do need to work harder and get better. Need to provide people with the means, motivation and opportunity to share and capture info.

His opinion can be contrasted against that of an knowledge worker further down the hierarchy in the same organisation; an engineer with more than 20 years experience, who rates the climate in Engcon a very low 31/100: *There are many who pretend to share but only offer crumbs. They take but do not give. There is no sense that managers realise this is happening as these types play the "knowledge is power" game quite successfully.*

One reason might be that the relevance of organisational context-building information and knowledge for a knowledge worker's daily tasks is often indirect and not of immediate urgency. A day's routine tasks can – in a narrow sense and with a short-term focus – be accomplished without knowing the organisation's vision, mission and strategy, why the task is necessary or who the people in the neighbouring department are. And one does not 'need to know' the latest financial results in order to respond to a customer request about a product/service. Hence the apathy displayed by practitioners can be explained by managers' lack of interest in anything except issues that impact profit directly, visibly and immediately. It is a sad and cynical explanation, but one that is supported by other data; the highest ranking issue in Hackett's (2000) survey about what prevents implementation of KM, was (the lack of) 'a perceived need for KM'.

It is harder to explain the gap in the knowledge sharing literature about the role of managers' behaviours with relation to context-building knowledge and information. Even Schulz's study (2001), which is one of few to distinguish both horizontal and vertical knowledge sharing, only analyses vertical information flows upwards in a study of managers in Danish-American parent/subsidiary relationships.

There may be at least two explanations for the lack of studies about management behaviours in relation to organisational context. One reason might that the dominant epistemology and ontology of the concept of knowledge, mentioned in the theory chapter, does not provide foundation for proper theory.

The other reason might be the research methodology, which is dominated by questionnaires with predetermined questions surveying perceptions held by managers while perceptions by 'normal' employees in organisations are rarely seen. Responses like the Engcon example above highlight the research problem. Depending on whom the researcher approaches the context for knowledge sharing in Engcon looks completely different: the chief executive perceives one context, the knowledge worker another.

The empirical data support the view that research in the knowledge management field would benefit from a shift of perspective: away from knowledge-as-object toward an epistemology, which includes knower and context with the known. This is hardly a new argument; the empirical data in this study merely reinforce Michael Polanyi's (1958) recommendation to make the 'knower' a crucial part of knowing. A shift in research paradigm might open up novel research fields; one example is Stenmark (2001), who, based on a case study, argues that information about the *location* of tacit knowledge has a value in itself that can be exploited.

The empirical findings in this study, finally, highlight a research issue of a more general nature: the effects of managers' apathy in organisations. Manager actions and decisions are often studied, but what about the absence of action? Apathy is not innocuous; it communicates an unspoken value statement: the issue is unimportant and not worth attention. Worse, apathy about an issue may create distrust at least among those who consider it worthy of attention. The empirical data suggest that management apathy can be regarded as disabling behaviour, at least in field of knowledge creation, sharing and application. Could apathy be regarded as disabling behaviour also in other areas?

The commercial benefits of knowledge sharing are not explored empirically or theoretically in this paper. In this sense it joins the large group of studies, which assumes that although knowledge sharing may be negative for an individual (Cabrera & Cabrera 2005), it is (within limits) of commercial benefit for an organisation. The commercial benefits of knowledge sharing have proved to be very difficult to ascertain and are hence not thoroughly explored empirically or theoretically. Authors tend to take

the benefits for granted and have used application capture (Foss & Pedersen 2002), successful knowledge transfer (Szulanski 1996) or accomplished knowledge transfer (Stein & Ridderstråle 2001) as dependent variables. Management apathy with regard to knowledge sharing is hard to argue against until more empirical data confirm unequivocally whether there is commercial value.

The perspective of non-managers in this study, while beneficial compared to the more common management perspective, creates limitations too. One is that the human tendency to blame other people for any problem, quite likely understates the respondents disabling behaviours in the sample organisations. One indication for this is that texts mentioning behaviours, which disable knowledge and information flows vertically upwards, from staff to managers, are rare. Another limitation is that, since organisational context emerges as such an important issue, the dataset is too small to allow generalisation beyond the 12 organisations in the sample.

We are left with two hypotheses to be studied by future research: that organisational context disabled by management apathy is the main issue that prevent knowledge sharing in organisations. The findings suggest another hypothesis: that time and resources spent by managers on actively sharing contextual information and knowledge build both organisational context and work group context and hence improve knowledge sharing both across work groups and in the work groups.

Managerial Implications

This study has several managerial implications. Perhaps the most important is that apathy is not passive, it can be understood as disabling 'action' – the opposite of encouraging action. An apathetic manager, who does not actively encourage knowledge sharing is unwittingly creating obstacles to share and is gradually disabling the context for creating, sharing and applying knowledge. The silo walls in organisations are built of apathy.

The data suggest that encouraging action has a very high impact. Managers, who display generosity in sharing context-building information, might tear down not only the silo walls on the organisational level; they might also enhance knowledge sharing in

their work groups. Although this implication must still be treated as a hypothesis it should be safe to test in practice, for instance by adding more face-to-face meetings, where contextual knowledge and information are shared. This could have a very high value and might be regarded as investments in context building.

Not walking the talk, treating managers and staff differently, not encouraging sharing actively, being risk averse, not listening to opposing opinions, and not being willing to change. These are the six most common bad behaviours of a manager with regard to context building according to this study and should be avoided. Fortunately, the study also suggests that the poisonous concoction of all six in one person – a veritable “Supervisor from Hell” – is a rare occurrence at least in Western organisations.

Finally, a general guideline for managers interested in improving knowledge creation and sharing in their workgroups: Do not focus on the knowledge. Instead, pay attention to improving the context in which knowledge is created, shared and applied.

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