

# KNOWLEDGE SHARING AMONG FACULTIES – QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM POLISH UNIVERSITIES

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## **Abstract**

**Background.** Management over the last decades has seen knowledge sharing become a key tool for the success of a variety of institutions. Many companies and other organizations have developed knowledge management programs as the key to their future development strategies. There are a number of organizations that have identified knowledge sharing as one of their core management tools. Yet despite its growing popularity, knowledge sharing remains a complex and challenging task.

**Research aims.** This article attempts to identify the main group of knowledge sharing barriers in Polish universities and to verify if there are any specific cultural elements that create those barriers.

**Method.** The primary data for this article was collected by conducting 47 in-depth interviews (IDI) with academic staff from 9 universities in Poland.

**Key findings.** The research reveals that the most important are the individual knowledge sharing barriers, mostly associated with the lack of trust among academic staff.

**Keywords:** Knowledge sharing, Knowledge management, Organizational culture, Knowledge sharing barriers, HEI, Public and private universities in Poland

## **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Culture plays an important role in the success of knowledge management. Many examples can be found where well designed knowledge management tools and processes failed because people believed they were already sharing well enough, or that senior managers did not really support it, etc. However, no matter how strong the commitment and approach to knowledge management, culture is stronger. That is why the aim of this article is to find out which are the most important barriers in knowledge sharing in Polish universities and to see if there are any specific cultural elements that create those barriers.

## **Knowledge Management**

One of the most significant challenges to understanding knowledge management is the difficulty in understanding the concept of knowledge. A common approach to this subject is the positing of a hierarchical relationship between data, information, and knowledge. This approach sug-

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gests that data holds the most basic status. When processed for practical application, data is raised to the level of information. Information, in turn, is applied by individuals to create knowledge. Knowledge is “information possessed in the mind of individuals: it is personalized information (which may or may not be new, unique, useful, or accurate) related to facts, procedures, concepts, interpretations, ideas, observations, and judgments” (Alavi & Leidner, 2001, p. 109).

Knowledge Management has emerged over the last decades as a result of many intellectual, societal, and business forces. Knowledge Management has become a valuable business tool. However it is a complex one, and will still be under development for a long time to come. Significant changes in the workplace have already taken place, but the changes expected to come will be even greater.

### **Knowledge Sharing**

Knowledge sharing is regarded as a fundamental means through which organizational competitive advantage can be reached. The way knowledge is shared within the frameworks of the organization is essential and central not only to the success of the organization where it takes place but also among those who share it, since those who take part in the knowledge sharing process also benefit from it.

The study of knowledge sharing has emerged as a key research area from a broad and deep field of study on technology transfer and innovation, and more recently from the field of strategic management. Increasingly, knowledge-sharing research has moved to an organizational learning perspective.

Knowledge sharing, is mainly described as an activity during which information or other important contents are shared (Möller & Svahn, 2004; Li, 2010). The approach presented by Bartol and Srivastava (2002) contains information as an element of knowledge sharing and defines it as the action in which relevant information is diffused by employees to others across the organization. Möller and Svahn (2004, p.220) stress that knowledge sharing is “sharing not only codified information, such as production and product specifications, delivery and logistics information, but also management beliefs, images, experiences, and contextualized practices such as business-process development”. Li (2010, p. 40) defines knowledge sharing as an activity “in which participants are involved in the joint process of contributing, negotiating and utilizing knowledge”.

The literature identifies five primary contexts that can affect such successful knowledge-sharing implementations: (a) the relationship between the source and the recipient, (b) the form and location of the knowledge, (c) the recipient’s learning predisposition, (d) the source’s knowledge-



sharing capability, and (e) the broader environment in which the sharing occurs.

A synthesis of this research suggests the three types of knowledge-sharing activities to be evaluated:

1. Analyses of the form and the location of the knowledge (it is important because each can affect the types of sharing processes that will be necessary as well as how challenging these processes might be);
2. The types of agreements (rules of engagement and managerial practices adopted by the parties are important for evaluation in that they can shape both the flows of resources and knowledge between the parties and the actions taken to overcome and accommodate significant relational differences between the parties);
3. The specific knowledge-sharing activities used (they are important in that they are the means through which the parties seek to facilitate knowledge sharing).

While some theorists argue that high investment rates in physical and human capital drive national innovation and growth rates (Kim & Lau, 1994; Krugman, 1994), “assimilation theorists” instead argue that entrepreneurship, effective learning, and innovation are separate, but equally important variables affecting development (Kim & Nelson, 2000). Central to both approaches, nonetheless, is an understanding of the importance of the sharing of ideas.

The study of knowledge sharing has its roots within the technology transfer and innovation literature. However, it can be observed that different nations’ successes or failures in fostering economic growth through technological development can be partially explained by the role of culture.

There are several ongoing debates to whether knowledge sharing should be people-driven or technology-driven. Authors of the management discipline usually argue that knowledge sharing is mostly about people and adaptations to the social dynamics of the workplace rather than technology (Cross & Baird, 2000; Davenport, 1997).

The following list (Riege, 2005) constitutes 36 knowledge-sharing barriers divided into 3 main groups. The first one includes individual knowledge sharing barriers:

1. General lack of time to share knowledge, and time to identify colleagues in need of specific knowledge;
2. Apprehension of fear that sharing may reduce or jeopardise people’s job security;
3. Low awareness and realisation of the value and benefit of possessed knowledge to others;



4. Dominance in sharing explicit over tacit knowledge such as know-how and experience that requires hands-on learning, observation, dialogue and interactive problem solving;
5. Use of strong hierarchy, position-based status, and formal power ("pull rank");
6. Insufficient capture, evaluation, feedback, communication, and tolerance of past mistakes that would enhance individual and organizational learning effects;
7. Differences in experience levels;
8. Lack of contact time and interaction between knowledge sources and recipients;
9. Poor verbal/written communication and interpersonal skills;
10. Age differences;
11. Gender differences;
12. Lack of social network;
13. Differences in education levels;
14. Taking ownership of intellectual property due to fear of not receiving just recognition and accreditation from managers and colleagues;
15. Lack of trust in people because they misuse knowledge or take unjust credit for it;
16. Lack of trust in the accuracy and credibility of knowledge due to the source; and
17. Differences in national culture or ethnic background; and values and beliefs associated with it (language is part of this).

The second group comprises organizational knowledge sharing barriers, such as:

1. Integration of KM strategy and sharing initiatives into the company's goals and strategic approach is missing or unclear;
2. Lack of leadership and managerial direction in terms of clear communication of the benefits and values of knowledge sharing practices;
3. Shortage of formal and informal spaces to share, reflect and generate (new) knowledge;
4. Lack of transparent rewards and recognition systems that would motivate people to share more of their knowledge;
5. Existing corporate culture does not provide sufficient support for sharing practices;
6. Deficiency of company resources that would provide adequate sharing opportunities;
7. External competitiveness within business units or functional areas and between subsidiaries can be high (e.g. not invented here syndrome);



8. Communication and knowledge flows are restricted to certain directions (e.g. top-down);
9. Physical work environment and layout of work areas can restrict the effect of sharing practices;
10. Internal competitiveness within business units, functional areas, and subsidiaries can be high;
11. Hierarchical organisation structure inhibits or slows down most sharing practices;
12. Size of business units is often not small enough and unmanageable to enhance contact and facilitate the ease of sharing.

The third group consists of technological knowledge sharing barriers, such as:

1. Lack of integration of IT systems and processes impedes the way people do things;
2. Lack of technical support (internal and external) and immediate maintenance of integrated IT systems obstructs work routines and communication flows;
3. Unrealistic expectations of employees as to what technology can do and cannot do;
4. Lack of compatibility between diverse IT systems and processes;
5. Mismatch between individuals' need requirements and integrated IT systems and processes that restrict sharing practices;
6. Reluctance to use IT systems due to lack of familiarity and experience with them;
7. Lack of training regarding employee familiarisation with new IT systems and processes;
8. Lack of communication and demonstration of all advantages of any new system over existing ones.

### **Polish Higher Education System and Knowledge Sharing**

Non-public schools of higher learning have been operating in Poland for nearly 22 years. The authorisation to establish non-state higher education institutions was the most fundamental change to the Polish educational system. The establishment of non-public universities was soon followed by their rapid growth. New courses were created, the gross enrolment ratio was rising and so was the competition for public schools. In 2002 this system comprised of 250 higher education institutions and roughly 500,000 students. Since the academic year 2005/2006 the number of students in Poland has been plummeting. In the academic year 2010/2011 there existed 328 non-public schools of higher learning with the total enrolment figure of 580 016, as compared with the overall national enrolment figure of 1 841 251 (data published by GUS – National Office of Statistics). At the moment the number of HEI operating on the Polish market is decreasing.



The change in dynamics within the environment of institutions of higher education, e.g. the demographic low, increasing domestic and foreign competition, and institutional changes determine the continuous restructuring of the market.

Since knowledge, both tacit and explicit, resides in the minds of the people and some of it can be codified and become common, then managing people's knowledge becomes a challenge to almost every organization. The situation at an HEI is not very much different. Ensuring that what is known in one part of the institution is available to all faculties and departments is one of the strategic tasks of the management and will help academics to learn from each other and to become efficient and effective in their core activities.

## METHOD

Both primary and secondary data were collected for this research. The primary data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews (IDI) to the academic staff in 9 universities in Poland. From each university/college a sample of 3-7 academic staff was selected for this research and this research also comprised of private and public universities, and colleges (Table 1). Data collection for this study began in May 2013 and ended in late November 2013. There were two research questions:

RQ 1: Which group of knowledge sharing barriers is the most dominant?

RQ 2: Are there any specific cultural elements that prevent academic staff from sharing knowledge?

**Table 1.** Characteristics of a Research Sample

University or College	Private / Public	Number of respondents			
		Full professor	Associate professor	Assistant professor	Teaching assistant
1	Private	0	0	2	1
2	Private	0	1	3	0
3	Public	1	1	2	2
4	Private	1	0	2	1
5	Public	1	0	2	2
6	Private	0	1	3	2
7	Private	1	2	1	1
8	Private	1	2	1	3
9	Public	1	2	3	1

Source: own study.

## RESULTS

This paper has outlined the barriers to knowledge sharing identified in Polish universities through a series of in-depth interviews. The work has



shown that the majority of barriers are concerned with people issues. The tables below presents the research findings. In both tables barriers are listed accordingly to their importance. For each type of barrier the author presented only selected opinions.

**Table 2.** Individual Knowledge Sharing Barriers Indicated During the Research

Barriers	Respondents' opinions
Faculty does not share knowledge because they think knowledge is very powerful	<p>"Knowledge means access to power. You have to be very careful with who to trust. I'm extremely cautious and as I see, people are getting more and more reserved with sharing anything."</p> <p>"I cannot share some information simply because I'm then losing control over people and resources."</p>
Faculty does not share knowledge because of the fear of it being misused by taking unjust credit	<p>"I don't trust many people. I share knowledge only with a small group of people. I don't want to work for somebody's success. I helped too many times. A few times I have not even heard a simple thank you."</p> <p>"What is interesting is the fact that many people share knowledge only with a small, trusted group of people. They do not – as the put it – "invest" in others."</p>
Lack of clarity on issues of confidentiality can lead to either withholding information that can be helpful or sharing it inappropriately	<p>"Those who get most of the information in my university don't want to share it. I think they are afraid that at some point they could be cut off from the source. And I understand them."</p>
Lack of interaction between those who need knowledge and those who can provide knowledge	<p>"I observe that people are simply not willing to share knowledge. Those who can provide this, especially younger members of staff, are simply not interested."</p>
Faculty is reluctant to seek knowledge from their seniors	<p>"I am a little bit intimidated to seek knowledge from my superiors. I think they will look down on me."</p> <p>"I don't want to show that I do not know something. Depending on the person of course, but it can be a little bit embarrassing"</p>
Faculty is afraid to reveal they do not know something; they do not want to take risks or be shown wrong because they would feel embarrassed	<p>"It happened to me 2 or 3 times that I got a reprimand in front of other people at the meeting for asking for some advice on something that I supposedly "must have known". Do you think I am going to risk it again?"</p> <p>"Nowadays competition is immense. I do not want to indicate my "weaker areas". I don't want to show people where my Achilles' heel is.</p>
Perceived benefits of knowledge hoarding makes people feel secure and safe	<p>"The more I know, and the less others know about certain things, makes me feel more secure."</p> <p>"We live in the age where information is everything. People strategically share information. Information isn't simply for everyone. Just like money."</p> <p>"Information equals money. Do you give away your money just like that...? No, the more you know the richer you are."</p>
Fear of losing resources	<p>"People don't want to lose access to good sources – the cash cows. You know what I mean."</p>

Source: own research.



Conducted research shows that the most identified barriers belong to the individual knowledge sharing barriers group (Table 2). The second group is the organizational knowledge sharing barriers. They were presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Organizational Knowledge Sharing Barriers Indicated During the Research**

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Respondents' opinions</b>
Competition (both real and perceived) for limited resources decreases motivation and safety for sharing.	<p>"Access to resources is everything."</p> <p>"Currently the competition on the market is unbelievable. Young people are smart, sharp and they are ready to work and fight very hard. Often in a quite brutal way. I'm not risking my position. I generally don't share what I know with others. I share knowledge just with one person. And he does the same thing for me, I hope."</p> <p>"Knowledge keeps you in the game. I have one ally in my department. We protect one another. The rest of the people – I don't trust them."</p>
Lack of formal and informal activities to cultivate knowledge sharing	<p>"I believe that if the university organized some informal activities to enable staff from different departments to get together and share knowledge on various levels and from different fields they (university) would benefit from that very much. A Slavic soul simply needs alcohol and dance."</p> <p>"Any sort of team building activities would be a great option. Bigger companies do it all the time. We've never done anything like that. It's needed."</p> <p>"I don't think funding is a big problem for organizing any informal activities for people from the university to get together and have fun. There are so many European projects going, they definitely can get the funding. Nobody seems to care."</p>

Source: own research.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The most important barriers in this study were individual barriers, which proved the hypothesis. Not much was said about scepticism towards the sharing of knowledge. This barrier almost does not exist. Every single respondent was aware of the fact that the organization gets something out of extensive knowledge sharing. Only 4 people mentioned a general lack of time (2 full professors and 2 assistant professors) to share knowledge, and 4 mentioned lack of time to identify colleagues in need of specific knowledge (2 full professors, 2 associate professors). Organizational barriers were mentioned to a lesser extent. The most important one is competition – most of the respondents are reluctant to share knowledge because it simply allows others to develop faster and easier. In this study technological knowledge of sharing barriers was not mentioned at all.

Team work is needed in terms of raising the quality of knowledge, raising efficiency and following the latest changes in the environment,





nevertheless the research shows that staff constrict themselves only to what must be shared. There is not much willingness to add something extra. A collaborative culture in the workplace influences knowledge management as it allows staff more access to increased levels of knowledge exchange, which is a prerequisite for knowledge creation (Lee & Choi, 2003). However, in this case we cannot talk about the lack of collaborative culture. The problem concerns mainly mutual trust. Due to factors such as cultural reasons (a general lack of trust in Polish culture), and a highly competitive work place, staff are afraid to share knowledge, mainly because of the fear of losing resources and power. Mutual trust has always been an important factor in high performance teams. The existence of mutual trust in an organisation facilitates open and substantive knowledge exchange (Abrams *et al.*, 2003; Lin, 2006; O'Dell & Grayson, 1999; Robertson & Hammersley, 2000). The research shows that one of the most important barriers in knowledge sharing among staff is the low level of mutual trust, perhaps suggesting the long shadow of history as well as the current political situation.

This conducted study is just an exploratory one. It is recommended that in order to gain a wider picture of the issues underlying the findings, quantitative research with a large number of respondents should be undertaken.

In the Knowledge Economy, knowledge is the most valuable asset and the only source of a sustainable competitive advantage. Increasingly, what organizations know determines the degree of business success. Many organisational factors, such as hierarchy, power, available resources, support, reward systems and, ultimately, culture could either impede or promote knowledge sharing behaviors. This study has demonstrated that there are a myriad of cultural barriers to knowledge sharing. They can often prevent effective knowledge sharing. It is therefore necessary to identify and to try to understand them in order to eliminate their influence. Even if it will be possible to remove some of these barriers, other influences are likely to remain.

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## DZIELENIE SIĘ WIEDZĄ MIĘDZY WYDZIAŁAMI – WYNIKI BADAŃ JAKOŚCIOWYCH WŚRÓD POLSKICH UNIWERSYTETÓW

### Abstrakt

**Tło badań.** W ostatnich dekadach obserwuje się wzrost znaczenia dzielenia się wiedzą. Dla wielu organizacji stanowi ono klucz do sukcesu, podstawę rozwoju strategii a także należy do głównych narzędzi zarządzania. Jednak pomimo rosnącego znaczenia dzielenie się wiedzą nadal pozostaje dość skomplikowanym zjawiskiem, które dla wielu organizacji nadal pozostaje wyzwaniem.

**Cele badań.** W artykule podjęto próbę identyfikacji grup barier związanych z dzieleniem się wiedzą pod kątem powszechności ich występowania w polskich uczelniach oraz poznanie elementów kultury, które wpływają na te bariery.

**Metodyka.** Przeprowadzono 47 wywiadów swobodnych z kadrą naukowo-dydaktyczną z 9 publicznych i prywatnych uczelni w Polsce

**Kluczowe wnioski.** Badanie wskazuje, że większość barier związanych z dzieleniem się wiedzą pochodzi głównie z grupy barier indywidualnych i jest w największym stopniu powiązana z brakiem zaufania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** dzielenie się wiedzą, zarządzanie wiedzą, kultura organizacyjna, bariery dzielenia się wiedzą, szkolnictwo wyższe, uczelnie publiczne i prywatne w Polsce

