

To Share or Not to Share: Hidden Agendas in Knowledge Sharing

Ruey-Lin Hsiao
The Logistics Institute Asia Pacific &
Department of Decision Sciences
National University of Singapore
1 Business Link, BIZ1, 03-06, Singapore 117592
Tel: +65 65163074 Fax: +65 67792621
rueylin@nus.edu.sg

Alvin Ho
National University of Singapore
Address here
Tel: +65 6516-3014 Fax: +65 67792621
g0405043@nus.edu.sg

Celest Liu
National University of Singapore
Address here
Tel: +65 6516-3014 Fax: +65
67792621
g0405042@nus.edu.sg

Abstract

Many innovative knowledge management systems failed to reach its full potential not only because of technical problems and organizational barriers but also because social actors are not motivated to share in the first place. Although current studies have identified a variety of motivational factors which may inhibit knowledge sharing, we still know relatively little about the implicit reasons, or hidden agendas, underlying these factors. This field-based study investigates an unsuccessful adoption of a knowledge-sharing system which is employed to facilitating supply chain operations across two locations – Taiwan and China. It highlights the dilemma of knowledge-sharing encountered by engineers based in the two organizations. This analysis also illustrates how explicit incentive mechanisms may only induce insignificant improvement but reinforce counterproductive collaborative behavior. This research analyzes such knowledge-sharing dilemmas through organizational members' implicit concerns in, and fears of, exchanging knowledge with their colleagues. The findings offer important implications for promoting knowledge sharing within engineer communities and examine the challenges of knowledge-management system adoption in Asian context.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing, motivation, incentive mechanisms, knowledge-management system, counterproductive collaborative behavior

1. Introduction

Increasingly, a company's competitive advantage lies in the combination of physical, organizational and intellectual assets (Barney 1991). This train of thought has encouraged contemporary enterprises to embrace organizational knowledge as a valuable and inimitable asset which a source of sustained competitive advantage (Lado and Wilson 1994; Spender 1996; Tsoukas 1996). As a result, knowledge-management systems such as virtual forum, knowledge repertoire, and expert systems, are developed to help employees to share their

ideas and best practices. Information systems have provided a more effective way to codify, acquire and share knowledge (Davenport and Prusak 1997).

However, the identification and transfer of best practices through these innovative systems are seldom successful in real-life applications (Alavi and Leidner 2001; McDermott 1999; O'Dell and Grayson 1998). Research in this area has established that external conditions and systems features are two main causes for the unproductive adoption of these knowledge-based innovations. Issues such as lack of motivation mechanism (Huber 2001), inappropriate conversion of knowledge (Nonaka 1994), and ineffective knowledge reuse (Markus 2001) are identified to explain the main challenges for the use of knowledge management systems.

Our study focuses on the issue of incentive and motivation. The lack of motivation will discourage users' intention to adopt knowledge-management system and engage in knowledge-share in the first place, even before they can see the actual benefit of this innovation (Ba, Stallaert and Winston, 2001). There are generally two sources of disincentives. The first is concerned with users' evaluation of systems in terms of its relevance, usefulness, and ease of use. The second is related to the social aspect of resistance, such as lack of economic incentive to share (particularly from the giver side), lack of psychological ownership (to involve and be empowered in knowledge-sharing), and lack of absorptive capacity (especially from the receiver side).

The present studies have suggested different types of incentive mechanism to motivate users. For example, a voting mechanism can be offered to allow users to vote on a set of alternatives (Gavish and Gerdes 1997). Such a mechanism can encourage users' actively involvement. A company could also provide monetary incentives so that users are willing to spend time to contribute their know-how and apply systems to engage learning. In this way, users may be willing to give away certain knowledge if the return is justifiable. Alternatively, a reputation mechanism can be established so as to acknowledge the knowledge givers' sharing behavior. Although reputation is an intangible asset, one's reputation could accumulate social capitals for future gains such as career promotion. From a social exchange perspective, organizations may also cultivate a knowledge-sharing culture to promote goodwill sharing – employees share knowledge because of their altruism preferences (Constant et al. 1994).

However, less-explored subject of motivation research in this area is to look at the "hidden agenda", or implicit reasons, for not sharing knowledge. The motivation factors may be more sophisticated than they appear to knowledge users (for both the giver and recipient). In certain situations, knowledge givers may want to share with the recipients but unwilling to do so because they fear the implicit consequence that may endanger their personal gains. For instance, by sharing knowledge as a public good, social actors might encounter free-riders and people who abuse such goodwill by claiming the ownership of knowledge shared in the repertoire (Cabrera and Cabrera 2002). Under this circumstance, to avoid being labeled as bad citizens in an organization, knowledge users may choose to remain silent and engage in counterproductive activities. Such hidden agendas nevertheless are not to be discussed openly and therefore motivation mechanism designed to promote knowledge-sharing may only produce marginal impact on social actors.

In this study, we attempt to articulate examine motivation issues in knowledge sharing and unveil the hidden intention that prevent people to share – these concerns are hidden not because of the knowledge users' inability to share but because of the unwillingness to share. This paper is structured in the following way. The next section explores the theoretical basis of knowledge sharing motivation within organizations. The third section reports research methods employed by this field-based study. The fourth section presents research findings

with regards to five hidden agendas. Lastly, we suggest theoretical and practical implications of this study with regard to knowledge-sharing challenges.

2. Motivations for Knowledge-sharing

Asking people to share what they know can be difficult. The first challenge is to get people motivated. Advance information systems such as knowledge database and online discussion forum, such as Eureka employed by Xerox (ref here) and ShareNet used by Siemens (Voelpel and Han 2005), are often used to facilitate knowledge acquisition and dissemination. However, before a company embarks on any form of knowledge sharing via innovative technologies, they must ensure that organizational members are motivated to share. The issue of people's motivation therefore is the first and foremost impediment a company needs to deal with.

Ideally, to promote effective knowledge-sharing, knowledge should be considered as a public good (Wasko and Faraj 2000). In this way, knowledge exchange is motivated by moral obligation, generalized reciprocity, and community interests rather than by narrow self-interest. In reality, nonetheless, although most organizational members understand that sharing knowledge will benefit the company, people choose not to share what they know for many good reasons. Specifically, people hesitate to contribute because of fear of criticism, or of misleading the community members. These reasons are related to technology, knowledge, and organization (Ardichvili et al. 2003; Empson 2001; Kalling 2003).

With regards to technology, people will not be motivated to share knowledge if the systems that support knowledge storage and transmission are unreliable (von Krogh et al. 2000). The lack of robust knowledge-management infrastructure will pose serious problems. Sufficient training is also required as to assist employees share knowledge through applying the knowledge-management systems (Zhang et al. 2005).

In terms of knowledge, the transfer of tacit knowledge is often problematic because such knowledge is situated and context dependent (Brown and Duguid 1991). The conversion of such tacit knowledge into explicit format can be difficult and thus fail to motivate employees (Nonaka 1994). Knowledge givers will not be motivated to share if the receivers lack of absorptive capacity, or sufficient prior knowledge to acquire new source of knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). Moreover, if a receiver never perform his duty and contributes to the knowledge repertoire, givers will eventually terminate their contributions to the community (Lam 1997).

In the organization aspect, firms need to nurture a knowledge-sharing culture to encourage employees' exchange of information (Amit and Schoemaker 1993). When people feel a sense of belonging in the community, they are more incline to share. Apart from nurturing a sharing culture, firms also need to build trust among different team members (Chowdhury 2005). Trust must be developed between every member in order to improve knowledge sharing throughout the organization. Employees who perceived knowledge as a means of achieving upward organizational mobility are less likely to share (Burgess 2005).

In the lack of motivation to share knowledge, explicit incentive mechanisms can be often design to motivate knowledge users. These incentive mechanisms may include monetary rewards, job performance assessment, reputation mechanism, and social interaction enhancement (Kubo and Saka 2002; Markus 2001). For instance, rewards could be made partly contingent on knowledge sharing behaviors as in merit pay. Rewards based on collective performance are also effective in creating a climate of cooperation, ownership, and commitment among employees. Team-based incentives, such as profit-sharing, gain-sharing,

and employee stock options, are particularly instrumental in enhancing knowledge sharing company-wide (Bartol and Srivastava 2002).

However, sharing knowledge within a community may prove to be more sophisticated than simply removing technology barriers – such as improving technology robustness – and organizational impediments – such as a lack of knowledge-sharing culture. But, in many instances, although people can be motivated by explicit incentive mechanisms and share what they know, many of them also may have other implicit concerns and hidden agendas. Such behaviors are best examined by considering “knowledge as constructed, disseminated, and legitimated through an ongoing process of interaction among individuals” (Empson 2001, pp. 858). To fully understand why people are reluctant to share, we need to explore the implicit dimension and unveil the hidden agendas that concerns knowledge users.

3. Research Method

3.1 Case Selection

This case was based on an US company’s Asia headquarters based in Singapore, known as SPEED Technologies (all company names shown here are disguised as requested). SPEED needed to streamline its supply chain, and one key task was to facilitate effective sharing of product design and manufacturing knowledge with its key suppliers. QUICKLY was one of SPEED’s strategic suppliers, which is a US \$5 billion company based in Taiwan. The Optoelectronics Division of QUICKLY operates a manufacturing plant in Tianjin (a city nearby Beijing), China while the R&D group is based in Taipei, Taiwan.

In QUICKLY, effective supply chain operations required the Product Development Team of the R&D Group in Taipei to share product and process related knowledge with the Manufacturing Team of the Tianjin plant. This involved the transfer of such knowledge from the Taipei R&D team to Tianjin production team. However, over time (during 2003-2004), the Tianjin production team were inept in absorbing and assimilating knowledge transferred from Taipei R&D team. This resulted in increased product quality problems at the Tianjin plant.

In this situation, QUICKLY began to fall below SPEED’s expectations and felt increasingly helpless in handling many of the outstanding production disruptions and product quality issues. The Product Development Team often had to communicate with the Tianjin engineers and resolve these supply chain breakdowns from Taipei. Frequently, the Taipei engineers had to fly to Tianjin to resolve these issues personally. This created longer lead time for production, higher production costs, and escalating conflicts between the Taipei and Tianjin team. The price to pay for the poor knowledge transfer was tremendous, economically and socially. In Taipei, these supply chain disruptions imposed extra burden on the Product Development Team, resulting in fatigue and unnecessary distraction from their new product development tasks. In Tianjin, the Manufacturing Team also faced increasing yield loss at their production line due to the inability to master the process-related know-how. As a whole, poor knowledge sharing has resulted in increasing customer dissatisfaction, leading to diminishing sales and profits, and compounded by increased costs due to substantial yield loss at the production lines. The relationship is deteriorated between both teams, leading to further distrust.

Both teams are made up of ethnic Chinese, coming from similar cultural background, sharing the same language, and often working closely to one another affectively. Both teams were entwined in a symbiotic relationship whereby there is a strong mutual dependence for each other in order to ensure the organization’s economic survival. Nonetheless, unwittingly

they preferred not to share and receive knowledge from each other. Gradually, two parties were more inclined to act destructively, allowing collective loss as a result.

3.2 Method

Our investigations focused on examining the dysfunctional adoptive behavior behind the current knowledge-sharing situation in the Optoelectronic Division of QUICKLY. We employed a qualitative approach for the purpose of “theory elaboration”, which aims to apply a theory to better analyze a social phenomenon and at the same time elaborate a theory through cases (Lee, Mitchell and Sablinski 1999, pp.164). Knowledge sharing is a dynamic and intricate interaction of people, technology and context. Different patterns of human behaviors would inevitably play a major role in shaping the dynamics of knowledge sharing and the use of technology. However, such natural behaviors are not easily observable and are limited when it is studied in a controlled laboratory-type of environment (e.g. Griffith and Northcraft 1996). Self-defense responses are especially acute in cases where the objective is to uncover factors behind certain flaws within the organization. Social actors may be reluctant to reveal the realistic causes for fear of job security or other hidden reasons. This situation is especially true in the Asian context where organizational members are generally less outspoken than their Western counterparts, and they generally place the interests of their community above other incentives.

As such, our method of research would be conducted through observations of the employees at work and casual, open-ended one-on-one conversations in informal settings. We carefully selected a pool of targeted respondents from both teams to ensure a broad cross-section of the age, work experience and income groups, so as to reduce biasness (see Table 1). We targeted three respondents from the Taipei Product Development Team who were arranged to fly to Tianjin plant in order to collaborate on the introduction of a new product. In addition, we also targeted at five employees from Tianjin who are the key members of the Manufacturing Team.

Insert Table 1 about here

For two weeks during mid-April 2005, one researcher was working very closely with both Manufacturing and Product Development Teams on the introduction of a new optoelectronic product designed for SPEED. Based on the trust built upon the friendship and close working relationship over the years, we were able to get the respondents to share their thoughts and feedback on the current knowledge-sharing situation. In an ongoing basis, from June 2005 to February 2006, we traced these respondents and extended our interviews with engineers from both sides in order to understand how unproductive adoptive behaviors had been developed and affected the adoption of knowledge management systems.

The research involved face-to-face informal discussions with both the Taiwanese and PRC employees of QUICKLY. Such discussions are mostly integrated into the context of finding solutions to resolve technical issues in the shortest possible time, and include questions such as: How may knowledge sharing benefit your practices in supply chain operations? What do you perceive the current level of knowledge sharing between you and your Taiwanese/PRC (People of Republic of China) counterpart? Are you in any way motivated to share your knowledge with the Taiwanese/PRC engineers, given that such knowledge would immensely help both sides, and why not? What have prohibited you to share knowledge with your Taiwanese/PRC counterparts? What are the current motivation mechanisms? How well do the present motivation mechanisms, such as monetary rewards,

encourage you and your colleagues to share knowledge? What do you think of the present online knowledge management system? How does it facilitate knowledge sharing between you and your Taiwanese/PRC counterparts? What are your impressions of your Taiwanese/PRC counterparts on a personal level and at the working level?

We were also aware that many engineers would not be comfortable to reveal their true feeling in the formal personal interviews. Additionally we also conduct onsite observations and engage in informal interactions with the Taiwanese and the PRC employees. To obtain more authentic data, one of the researchers is working with both side's engineers in handling supply chain activities. This helped us gain in-depth information and obtain engineers' honest feedback. We avoided conducting formal/structural interviews or questionnaires in order not to offend the employees in the sensitive working context, especially in such a cultural setting employees are more reserved and less vocal.

4. Research Findings

4.1 Sharing Knowledge in Supply Chain

In Taipei, the Product Development Team consisted of four senior engineers, led by a senior manager. The team had clocked up years of experience in developing new optoelectronic products for SPEED Technologies. SPEED's R&D engineers would translate customer requirements into technical specifications of the new product and send these specifications to the Product Development Team in QUICKLY based in Taipei. Based on principles of manufacturability, the Product Development engineers would design products in accordance with the technical specifications and production capability. Subsequently, the Product Development engineers could transfer the product design from the Design Phase to the Mass Production Phase by working closely with production engineers from the Manufacturing Team based in Tianjin. QUICKLY used a MBO (Management By Objectives) system to evaluate employee performance.

For the Product Development Team, the most critical MBO target was "project cycle time", which measures the time taken from the receipt of new technical specifications, the completion of design, to the handover to the Manufacturing Team prior to the start of the Mass Production Phase. Typically the target cycle time would be three months. But with increased pressure on shortening the time-to-market for SPEED's products, the target had been reduced further to two months since mid-2004. Hence, effective knowledge transfer became the most important goal for the Product Development Teams. Yet to members of this team, other hidden personal agendas often overrode this goal. Our investigations indicated knowledge sharing challenges in three distinct contexts: economic, social and organizational.

The senior executives at the Taiwanese headquarters of QUICKLY recognized the importance of a knowledge management system. They committed significant resources towards deploying a robust technology platform to allow engineers to contribute information and exchange knowledge on supply chain operations. This system was first set up way back in 2002 and is hosted within the company's central intranet system which is maintained by a group of dedicated IT staff. The knowledge management system currently comprises of an online database, which stores technical documentations such as product specifications, testing specifications, etc and is protected by a simple password security system. In addition, there are robust tools within the knowledge management system which allows users to upload, search and retrieve existing knowledge, hence enabling knowledge reuse rather than regeneration of knowledge (reinventing the wheel). In 2004, system access was also extended to SPEED's engineers to facilitate transfer of knowledge between the two companies. In

short, QUICKLY has an enabling infrastructure that promotes sharing and collaboration of corporate knowledge and intellectual assets across various departments and regions, and even between different companies. The senior management of QUICKLY has also explicitly encouraged their employees to fully utilize the benefits of this knowledge management system, by offering various incentives which will be explored later in this paper.

4.2 Knowledge Sharing Problems and the Limit of Incentive Mechanisms

The most frequent encountered issue is organizational members' rationalization of their self-interests. An individual will assess the economic value of his personally held expertise and compare the reward of keeping such knowledge to oneself versus the cost of sharing the knowledge. The economic value of such knowledge is also dependent on the relevance of the knowledge to business requirements and the organizational duties of the individual.

For QUICKLY's product design engineers, the knowledge on the semiconductor package designs was critical to ensure manufacturability (the new product design can be manufactured) to be transferred to the Mass Production Phase. By frequently traveling to Tianjin and participating in the transition process, product design engineers accumulated important technical know-how. Nonetheless, there is no perceived benefit to motivate the product development engineers to share their valuable expertise while they were in constantly fears of being made redundant. One senior engineer who has 15 years of working experience in semiconductor packaging design noted:

You know, I have accumulated all these years of experience in semiconductor packaging, bit by bit, step by step, and it has brought me to my present position within the company. I personally feel privileged to enjoy the perks that came along with this position and the pay allows my family to live comfortably in Taipei. I know my job requires me to share knowledge with the Tianjin engineers, but do you think it would be wise of me to share everything with them?

Another key concern was the production engineers' fears that QUICKLY might in the long run close Taiwan offices and move the supply offshore to China. By keeping the R&D expertise in house and by not sharing fully to their Chinese colleagues, the product development engineers perceived that an effective way to protect their job security by withholding critical knowledge assets. Another engineers registered a typical concern:

Already the management has started to shift important functions and jobs to China due to the lower cost of labor there. Now, it is manufacturing; very soon, it will be product development. Semiconductor business is a very tough business, with low profit margins. So naturally jobs will gravitate towards lower cost centers, right?

For the product design engineers, a hidden agenda was to leverage on their product and process related knowledge to make them indispensable in the company. As a whole, collectively the design engineers hoped to show that R&D center in Taipei plays a strategic position by holding imitable knowledge assets. Moreover, the design engineers would need their expertise for negotiation of remuneration, as QUICKLY did not have an effective mechanism for engineers' job promotion and career planning. A senior engineer further commented:

You see, it is easy to say that I should always think of the company's interests before self-interests, but in the real world, I have to think of personal survival first. My technical knowledge is my prized asset, it gives me competitive edge

over the rest and most importantly, it ensures my monthly pay cheques. Sometime, it also helps me to bargain for pay raise. Why should I let go of such asset so easily? It will be suicidal to do that. Besides, I'm not the only one who thinks that way, if you look around, everyone in the team is also trying to protect his own advantage too...also, there is no incentive to share, so as long as I do my job well by transferring the product to the mass production phase, whatever happens after that is the responsibility of the manufacturing team.

Limit of Economic Incentives: QUICKLY's solution to increase users' incentive was to enhance the perceived benefits by linking economic incentives to the outcome of knowledge sharing. The company attempted to offer monetary rewards based on an individual's level of participation in knowledge sharing. However, the economic rewards only encouraged limited knowledge sharing efforts in QUICKLY's business context. Most engineers shown indifference towards the rewards. A Product Development manager quipped:

[Monetary rewards] are not practical in our business environment. Our business is focused on offering the lowest costs for our customers; so we operate at a razor-thin margin. We simply could not afford substantial monetary rewards for knowledge sharing. Besides, if the company is to undergo a downturn and therefore unable to pay the rewards, will this result in complete withholding of knowledge? In addition, no monetary rewards can replace a steady stream of monthly income. So I rather keep my job than having monetary rewards.

The Limit of Job Performance Assessment: Although the company wanted to provide more incentives by linking job performance to the contribution of knowledge, this measure ultimately cause backfire in QUICKLY. Engineers were wary of sharing ideas through verbal means or through actions, because they would fear that the recipients may claim the idea ownership. By measuring job performance through knowledge production in fact might incur more hidden concerns for knowledge sharing. Such initiatives actually could discourage knowledge sharing and accentuate the fear of free-riders. As a senior engineer in Taipei put it:

If they [the management] measure our job performance through our contribution to online documentations [as a form of knowledge sharing], then I better be wary and not reveal too much of what I know, when I am in Tianjin teaching the manufacturing team. I would be concerned about what I taught or demonstrated, as someone else might steal the idea. I prefer to document my knowledge first; but I simply could not afford the time for documentation.

The Limit of Reputation Mechanism: The company also employed social recognition tactics in order to motivate knowledge sharing engineers. For example, in order to acknowledge the production of knowledge, the contributors' names were listed in the online documentations stored in the knowledge repertoire. This was to provide a reputation mechanism to promote knowledge sharing as people who shared in the repertoire would duly receive social recognition. However, this was culturally not preferable because many engineers (ethnic Chinese) would be afraid being labeled as a 'show-off' person – which is considered not a gentlemanly behavior. The social cost of being labeled a 'show-off' person far outweighed that of social recognition. To share knowledge, the engineers would not receive social cognition but only community discrimination.

The Limit of Social Interaction: However, the company perceived it as a lack of departmental communication. To foster mutual trust, the company launched team-building

activities, such as off-site adventure games, communication training, and consultation, in order to improve the hard feeling between two teams. However, such team-building activities in fact caused more indignant responses. One quality assurance engineer from the manufacturing team summed it up:

When we took part in team-building activities, we did learn a lot about our teammates from Taipei. We learned to work together during the activities and trust each other. But once these activities were over, we returned back to reality. In fact, I even felt that having such activities would lead to un-realistic expectations of the other party and when such expectations are not met in real life, it can be greatly disappointing and lead to further deterioration of trust.

The above analyses explain the main knowledge sharing problems faced by QUICKLY and report five main incentive mechanisms employed by the company. In this case, the company must share knowledge between its product development and production teams in order to maintain the integrity of supply chain operations. In good faith, employees wanted to share what they know so that the company as a whole could survive in the competitive environment. But the incentive schemes suggested by the company did not seem to work well for the employees, because what is at stake is more than economic gains and self-interest. Our ethnographic study highlighted four hidden agendas which potentially prohibit knowledge sharing among engineers. These are implicit disincentives that discourage knowledge sharing between knowledge givers and receivers. Although current theories and practices have suggested explicit methods to alleviate these disincentives, the resolution of these hidden agendas can be more sophisticated than they appear to be.

4.3 Hidden Agenda #1: Defending Free-Riders

In a sense, sharing such knowledge to upgrade Chinese colleagues in Tianjin also provided a disservice to the company as a whole as perceived by the design engineers. There were many multinational corporations in the Wuqing Development Area and an engineer could easily earn 50% to 100% more than his current salary by acquiring such design-to-manufacturing knowledge. Job-hopping was not uncommon in China. As intellectual property laws in China were not effectively reinforced, sharing knowledge with the Chinese employees would mean revealing proprietary knowledge to QUICKLY's competitors. For this reason, Taiwanese engineers preferred not to transfer the critical knowledge to the Chinese colleagues but often chose to fly to Tianjin personally in order to resolve the manufacturing issues. A senior design engineer cited:

Honestly speaking, it is a good idea to share; in fact, we faced so much pressure from our management and customer [SPEED] to resolve the technical issues and improve the yield. I know we should train the Tianjin engineers to handle these issues by sharing the knowledge openly. But, a theory is as good as a theory; in an ideal world, everybody should share knowledge openly. In the practical world where we live in, we have to be aware of the unknown traps. My colleagues in Tianjin often complained about the high turnover rates in their departments. An engineer could come in and work with us for a few months; and after receiving intensive training in different aspects of technical areas and at times involving in proprietary knowledge transfer, he moves on to a rival company across the street.

There was also a sentiment for not wanting to share valuable knowledge with unappreciative partners. For the design engineers in Taipei, what they are about to share was

hard-earned knowledge. There was a hard feeling for giving away such knowledge too easily to the Chinese colleagues who are perceived by Taiwanese engineers as opportunistic. A senior design engineer expressed such feeling:

In Taipei, we went through a lot of experimenting and hardships to accumulate the technical know-how. Now the Tianjin engineers, with so little experience but arrogant attitude and lofty ambitions, expect us to spoon-feed them with information and knowledge. This is certainly not morally right. There is a Chinese saying that one should go through hardships and personal experience in order to attain what he desires. Why should I be giving away hard-earned knowledge so easily, especially when my team and I still need to take time to sort out all the documents and place them on the intranet? Sorry, but we got better things to do.

Furthermore, most Chinese engineers still did not have fostered the concept of intellectual ownership. It was very common for them to claim credits in the hope for career advancement. Such an act was acceptable in the Tianjin office because no one would really take it too serious – in there, when everyone claimed the credit, the credit belongs to no one. However, this behavior was considered opportunistic and offensive from Taiwanese engineers' viewpoint, as one noted:

These opportunistic [Chinese] engineers would claim credits for things which they do not actually achieve. If you ask me about sharing with them some important tips, they may come around and claim these credits for themselves.

Under such sentiment, the Chinese colleagues in Tianjin were perceived as free-riders by their Taiwanese partners. There was a problem of knowledge asymmetry. It seemed that knowledge is predominantly contributed by the Taiwanese engineers whereas the Chinese engineers seem to act merely as a receiver. This discouraged knowledge sharing from the giver side. Nevertheless, such an attitude also in turn discouraged the Chinese engineers to sharing what they know in the fear of being perceived as inferior. A production engineer in Tianjin suggested:

The Product Development team has a richer pool of knowledge compared to our team. I really doubt that I am able to contribute any significant knowledge to them. They might look down at me and on my contributions.

4.4 Hidden Agenda #2: Avoiding Knowledge Liability

The design engineers also worried about become liable to their contribution of knowledge. In one illustrative instance, a senior engineer from the Product Development Team was asked to share with his Chinese production engineers on the maintenance of tester machine. The production engineer followed his advice and instruction but only caused an irreparable damage to a critical component of the tester. The machine was breakdown for several days which incurred expensive overhaul cost, not to mention the cost attached to the supply chain interruption. The design engineer requested an investigation to trace the root causes of the machine damage.

Consequently, the manufacturing team engineers escalated this issue to the top management, and placed blames on the Taiwanese engineer for giving wrong advices. The top management later found out that it was the Chinese engineer who had misinterpreted the advice. When the Chinese engineer found something was amiss, he did not seek further clarifications but engaged in personal experiment with the machine, thereby aggravating the damage. This episode had worried many Taiwanese engineers and as a result they lose a great

deal of confidence in sharing knowledge with the untrustworthy Chinese engineers. The victimized engineer expressed with sorrow:

This event left me with a permanent ‘scar’; I’m now very wary about sharing my knowledge with others [the Chinese engineers]. Who knows, perhaps the next time something similar will happen; and not only I will lose my ‘face’ but also my job too. It is just not worth the effort [of sharing my knowledge with them].

4.5 Hidden Agenda #3: Lacking Absorptive Capacity

Effective knowledge sharing requires the recipient side to equip with sufficient absorptive capacity to acquire knowledge from the giver. The recipient’s absorptive capacity consists of prior knowledge of the subject, enough experience on work practices, and both sides had interpreted knowledge exchange from their frame-of-reference and prior work practices. One senior engineer from the Product Development Team recounted his experience:

After working with them [the Manufacturing Team in Tianjin] for the past three years, I realized that that they have many bad working habits, especially the veteran workers. The less-experienced ones appear to be OK; but after more interactions with the veteran workers, the new comers had also acquired these bad habits. What [are the] bad habits? Plenty of them, like they always seeking the short-cut, taking the company’s stationeries home...but what irked me most was that some of them “chi-da-guo-fan” [literally, share food from the same pot].

As a result, most Taiwanese engineers tended to generalize the Chinese employees as incapable learners to absorb knowledge transferred. A Product Development manager observed that even though several Chinese engineers tried extremely hard to impress him, they however were lacking a systematic framework to organize their tasks. The manager explained that such prejudices come from a valid concern, as he noted:

I did try to impart our technical knowledge [from Taipei] to the Chinese counterparts so that our engineers could travel less to Tianjin. However, most of them [the Chinese engineers] just could not absorb the knowledge well enough to transfer the knowledge to actual production works. They might be good at following your instructions as long as you write them clearly on piece of paper, step by step. But if you ask them to re-apply the knowledge, it seems that there is a mental block preventing them to do so. I am not sure if this is due to their lack of confidence or just pure lack of capability to absorb.

The Manufacturing Team had also hard feeling toward the Taiwanese engineers. The Chinese engineers perceived that the Taiwanese partners were arrogant and at times share knowledge with little “hand-on” relevance. Since the Taiwanese engineers were not physical on the production line, what they share with the production engineers could be perceived as impractical which does not reflect the problem in situ. As a production manager from the Tianjin team puts it,

We are not too keen on receiving knowledge from the Taiwanese, especially on process-related issues. We will gladly accept their views on product-related issues since the design is from there. But with regards to process-related issues, we are here at the line 24 hours a day. They are far away in Taipei; so how are they able to understand how the process really works without being physically here? We feel that they could not understand the situation we are in. Maybe that’s why we

sometimes accept the knowledge from them as a form of courtesy; but in reality, our own practical knowledge is still more relevant.

In addition, the Taiwanese engineers' prejudice towards the Chinese engineers also created a self-fulfilling prophecy effect – “the Chinese engineers are incapable; so, do not even bother to teach them”. The self-fulfilling prophecy effect significantly altered the Taipei team's attitude when engineers attempted to share their knowledge with the Tianjin team. As a result, the Taipei team often treated the Tianjin team with a sense of contempt, which greatly demoralized the Chinese engineers and discouraged the reception of knowledge from the Taipei team. As a senior production engineer recalled:

Due to the nature of my work, I have to understand the product inside-out in order to prepare for mass production. So I have to interact with the Taiwanese frequently. I am thorough in my work and always try hard to understand everything as detail as possible. However, when I raised questions about the knowledge they offer, they oftentimes ignore my questions. It's like as if they expect me to just execute the instructions or follow the advice with no questions asked. It would be so much nicer if they are able to treat me with respect.

Perceived that the Taiwanese partners were not paying due respect to them, the Chinese engineers also became reluctant to request help from the Taipei office. On the Taipei side, a desire to share could sometimes be tempered with the fear of being labeled by their Chinese colleagues as a person who is intended to show Taiwanese superiority. A product design engineer noted a typical response:

Sharing knowledge will definitely help them [the Chinese engineers], that I'm pretty sure. But if they did not request for such knowledge, should I take the initiative to supply them with the knowledge? I don't think that's a good idea, they may think that I am trying to boast or show-off in front of them. I think it's better that they ask me first.

To encourage the knowledge sharing and enhance the recipients' absorptive capacity, the company had also tried to empower the Tianjin team and delegate more responsibilities to the onsite engineers. However, the Chinese senior executives were also not very confident to delegate tasks fully to their engineers of the Manufacturing Team. A production supervisor of the Manufacturing Team explained: “We take our instructions from the Product Development team; whatever they say, we listen. We try not to ask too many questions; probably they know what is best for us.” It was widely perceived that the Product Development Team had the authority in deciding how things should be run in the production line. The lack of empowerment by the Manufacturing team in making independent critical decisions also reduces the Chinese engineers' motivation to seek for in-depth knowledge. This reinforced the Chinese employees to rely on direct instructions.

In the perception of most Chinese engineers, taking more responsibilities could result in a higher risk of losing their jobs. Consequently, most engineers still preferred to rely on direct instructions given by the Taiwanese engineers. This reinforces Taipei team's belief that the Chinese engineers have lower absorptive capacity for knowledge acquisition and sharing strategic knowledge with them is therefore unnecessary. Moreover, empowering the Tianjin team would invariably escalate Taipei team's fears in job security (e.g. they could be replaced by the Chinese colleagues if jobs are moved offshore). As a result, when the empowerment

initiative was launched by the top management, the Taipei engineers were even more cautious in sharing knowledge with the Tianjin team.

4.6 Hidden Agenda #4: Engulfing Social Inequality

Another disincentive to share also stemmed from the social segregation between Taiwanese expatriates and the local Chinese employees. The expatriates enjoyed a better condition of the accommodations. They had their meals in restaurant-like settings while their Tianjin colleagues were restricted to having their meals in a canteen. The senior executives from the Manufacturing Team were of no exception. A typical sentiment was expressed by a senior manager in Tianjin factory: “I have gotten used to it. But yes, it seems like they are trying to show us that they are a level above us.”

One significant obstacle prevents successful knowledge sharing is the social segregation between Taiwanese and Chinese employees. An ideal solution would be remove the barriers and promote a fair work environment. The company had also considered this problem and emphasized that every employee should be treated equally regardless of their nationalities. However, this idea was quickly rejected by infuriated Taiwanese engineers, because the social equality initiative was ‘unequal’ as it failed to acknowledge the important intellectual properties beheld by the Taipei engineers and personal sacrifice made for the company (by traveling to a less pleasant workplace). This slightly self-deluded view had prohibited the Taiwanese engineers to accept the ‘social equality’ initiative. A product development manager in Taipei replied:

I don’t think any of us (Taiwanese) would agree to it. Traveling all the way from Taipei to a remote area like Wuqing is no joke. This is one of the perks we deserve here. Besides I do not think there is any serious implication due to such arrangement. We have been running this place for the past three years. If they [the management] do implement the initiative, I am not sure if I want to share with the manufacturing people anymore.

5. Implications and Conclusion

Prior studies have acknowledged that knowledge sharing may be discouraged by explicit motivational factors. In this study, “hidden agendas,” however, were found to be prevalent in disabling knowledge sharing. There is a need for an analysis for practices *in situ* in order to better understand the nature of such hidden agendas and their implication on knowledge sharing. If we are insensitive to these hidden frames of references, we may encounter unsuccessful knowledge sharing even in the presence of a well-designed enabling infrastructure and effective incentive mechanisms. This paper addresses these particular silences in an Asian context. It examines a real-life situation where the company has implemented necessary incentive systems to promote knowledge sharing. Yet due to the various hidden agendas withheld by employees, the objectives of the knowledge management system might ultimately not be achieved.

This study also raises broader questions about the social and political nature of the motivational forces behind knowledge sharing, such as the extent to which hidden agendas can inhibit, repress or constrain the participation of employees in knowledge sharing. Answering these questions can be very critical especially in Asia where individuals are less inclined to demonstrate or communicate their thoughts openly compared to their western counterparts. The existing studies mainly examine explicit motivation mechanisms, such as monetary rewards, which can be limited in facilitating knowledge sharing. On the other hand, organizational interventions designed to eliminate such hidden agendas could be deemed as

over-idealistic, as these agendas are deeply intertwined with the psychological and cultural mindsets of individuals. It is therefore recommended that further studies should look into ways in which such hidden agendas can be surfaced out, in order to reduce its negative impacts on knowledge sharing across organizations.

We can conclude that knowledge sharing in the Asian business environment is a highly complex and dynamic process that can be driven or impeded by social or political actors. These actors are embedded deep within the mindsets of individuals and are influential in one's motivation towards knowledge sharing. Some of them are seldom discussed or demonstrated openly, hence the term "hidden agendas". It is highly unlikely that explicit motivation mechanisms designed to promote knowledge-sharing can overcome such hidden agendas. We urge the need to move towards recognizing these hidden agendas in order to reduce their impact on productive knowledge sharing.

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Table 1. Fieldwork scheme

No.	Job Title	Organization	Age	Nationality	Work Experience
1	Product Development Manager	Product Development Team	35	Taiwanese	Managerial – 6 yrs Work – 12 yrs
2	Senior Engineer	Product Development Team	38	Taiwanese	Work – 15 yrs
3	Senior Engineer	Product Development Team	32	Taiwanese	Work – 9 yrs
4	Production Line Manager	Manufacturing Team	34	PRC	Managerial – 4 yrs Work – 8 yrs
5	Production Line Supervisor	Manufacturing Team	33	PRC	Work – 12 yrs
6	QA Engineer	Manufacturing Team	27	PRC	Work – 5 yrs
7	NPI Engineer	Manufacturing Team	26	PRC	Work – 4 yrs
8	Senior Process Engineer	Manufacturing Team	29	PRC	Work – 8 yrs

Table 2. The four hidden agendas

Hidden agenda	The concerns in Taiwan office	The concerns in Chinese office	Why they do not share knowledge
1. Fending off free riders	The Taiwanese are wary of the Chinese' reputation of being free-riders who might claim credit for knowledge shared with them.	The Chinese are fearful that their Taiwanese counterparts may perceive them as inferior in terms of knowledge.	There is a high level of distrust between the two sides, which stems from misconstrued perceptions and generalism.
2. Avoiding knowledge liability	The Taiwanese are worried about the consequences of being blamed for any undesired consequences of sharing knowledge.	The Chinese are less inclined towards seeking clarifications for fear of being perceived as not being intellectual equals to their Taiwanese counterparts.	Past instances whereby a Taiwanese was being blamed for the mistakes of his Chinese counterparts reinforce the fear on both sides.
3. Lacking absorptive capacity	The Taiwanese perceive their Chinese counterparts as lacking absorptive capacity.	The Chinese believe that their Taiwanese counterparts are arrogant and share knowledge without much focus on practicality.	Both sides' sense of prejudice against each other, create a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to further prevention of knowledge sharing.
4. Engulfing social inequality	The Taiwanese believes in segregating themselves from their Chinese counterparts to prove they are superior.	The Chinese are upset by the explicit show of such social inequality but are resigned towards accepting it.	Such social segregation forms a formidable barrier to knowledge sharing between both sides.