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# Dissecting knowledge hiding: a note on what it is and what it is not

Abraham Cyril Issac and Rupashree Baral

## Knowledge hiding

There are always ways of giving answers without actually giving them. This is highly visible across different organizations these days. When the emphasis is on openness and knowledge sharing, there is an equivalent construct which takes up a totally different position known as knowledge hiding. The transfer of knowledge has been under scrutiny since the time of Socrates where both mythos, the arguable part of knowledge and logos, derived from reading, gathering, and reasoning represented the two realms that constituted knowledge.

Later era saw the classification of knowledge into explicit and tacit where the transfer of the former turned out to be relatively easy as compared to the latter, and the explicit knowledge mainly saw its transformation into institutional memory. The main conundrum here was on the claim the organizations were making on the “intellectual assets” of employees. But later studies thwarted such claims and established that organizations cannot coerce its workers to transfer knowledge to other members of the organization. A reality check shows that there are deliberate attempts by individuals to conceal or withhold knowledge requested by another individual. This is categorically termed as knowledge hiding.

Knowledge hiding is formally defined by [Connelly et al. \(2011\)](#) as an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold knowledge. Though research interest in knowledge hiding is gaining popularity in recent years, the withholding of information has always been there in organizations. A poll of more than 1,700 readers conducted by a newspaper suggests that more than 75 per cent of the employees in organizations withhold knowledge from fellow workers ([The Globe and Mail, 2006](#)). Many have attempted studies on related concepts ([Table I](#)) like deception, but knowledge hiding is fundamentally different, with many a time an individual hiding knowledge, devoid of the intention to deceive.

There is reluctance to transfer knowledge even when the employees are treated with rewards and encouraged with incentives. Though knowledge hiding brings in certain detrimental effects like initiation of a distrust loop whereby collaboration and creativity gets adversely affected ([Lanke, 2018](#)), the same may sometimes be carried out because of positive intentions or in expectation of a better outcome as is the case of “white lie.” At times, it may be initiated to augment confidentiality, protect the feelings of the other party, or to immunize the interests of a third party. Thus, it may be wrong to generalize knowledge hiding as a uniformly negative approach or behavior.

## What knowledge hiding is not

In [Figure 1](#), the lines show some superficial similarities and display the relative position of knowledge hiding among related sets of behavior in an organization like counterproductive

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**Table I** List of studies that gave impetus to the research on knowledge hiding

Sl. no.	Concept	Attributes	Representative work
1	Reluctance to share knowledge	Even after systematic reward regime	Swap <i>et al.</i> (2001) Bock <i>et al.</i> (2005)
2	Knowledge withholding	76 per cent withholds knowledge	<i>The Globe and Mail</i> (2006)
3	Deception	Knowledge hiding not always deceptive	Takala and Urpilainen (1999) Saxe (1991) Buller and Burgoon (1996)
4	Dyadic exchange	Knowledge hiding studies dyadic interactions	Blau (1964) Szulanski (1996)
5	Knowledge hoarding	Accumulation of knowledge	Hislop (2003) Webster and Pearce (2008)
6	Counterproductive workplace behaviors	Always causes harm	Fox <i>et al.</i> (2001)
7	Workplace aggression	Physical or psychological harm	Schat <i>et al.</i> (2005)
8	Social undermining	Belittling or talking down	Duffy (2006)
9	Workplace incivility	Low intensity deviant behavior	Andersson and Pearson (1999)
10	Distrust	Lack of confidence in others	Mayer <i>et al.</i> (1995) Colquitt <i>et al.</i> (2007)
11.	Job engagement	Greater job engagement lesser knowledge sharing	Ford <i>et al.</i> (2015)
12.	Territoriality	Territorial behavior	Kang (2016)
13	Psychological ownership	Psychological ownership positively affects knowledge hiding	Peng (2013)

**Figure 1** Knowledge hiding vis-à-vis other prominent organizational behaviors



workplace behavior, deception, social undermining, workplace incivility, workplace aggression, knowledge hoarding, and knowledge sharing.

Though there are some overlaps between the concepts as evident from the Figure 1, the authors attempt to establish knowledge hiding as a unique construct. This essentially broadens the scope of knowledge transfer. Another such distinction should be made between knowledge hiding and knowledge sharing. Webster and Pearce (2008) suggests that these variables are not opposites of each other but totally distinct. Lack of knowledge sharing in an organization and knowledge hiding are different from the motivation point of view. Knowledge hiding can be an outcome of the thrust for behaviors, aligned with social norms, or it may come up as means to an end or an end result of laziness.

Many a time, lack of knowledge sharing maybe an outcome of dearth of the real actionable knowledge. Knowledge hiding is also different from counterproductive workplace behaviors. Individuals initiating knowledge hiding might not be intending to always harm others unlike the counterproductive behaviors which have a detrimental effect on other individuals and thereby

the organization. The target in case of the former is always individuals unlike, in the case of latter, where both the organization and individuals may be the victims.

Another relevant concept is workplace aggression which is related to physical or psychological harm caused by an individual in the workplace context. There are some superficial similarities with knowledge hiding, but as aforementioned, the intention to cause harm is always not linked to knowledge hiding.

Knowledge hiding may also appear similar to social undermining, which is intended to mask the worker's capability and tarnish their reputation but is different because, as aforementioned, the intention behind hiding knowledge is always not to harm others. Rude, discourteous behavior may be attributed to workplace incivility but is different from knowledge hiding. There are instances of knowledge hiding without showing any actual disrespect.

## Discussion

A superficial search in the Scopus-indexed journals show that, of the total studies in the area of knowledge management, 95 per cent of the studies are on knowledge sharing. This paper is an attempt to categorically understand the relatively novel construct of knowledge hiding and comprehend what knowledge hiding is not, even though other concepts bear some superficial similarities. The mere absence of knowledge sharing will not lead to knowledge hiding. It has to be intentional and always not deliberately motivated to harm others. Some of the existing works establish playing dumb, evasive hiding, rationalized hiding (Connelly *et al.*, 2011), and counter-questioning (Jha and Varkkey, 2018) as the different knowledge hiding strategies. That said, the manifestations of each of these are strictly context-dependent types.

The way in which individuals are rendering meaning to information or actionable knowledge, safety and security of their positions within the organization and most importantly job engagement are the other different factors which affect the disengagement of individuals from knowledge sharing. The extent of knowledge hiding is tactically governed by the territoriality and the knowledge-based psychological ownership. There are also studies that have tried to establish a link between task complexity, personality traits, expertise, job insecurity, etc., with knowledge hiding. Greater the complexity of the task in hand, more the individuals within the organization construe knowledge sharing as a futile exercise. Also, there are cases wherein individuals do not want to undermine their personal efforts and resources invested in learning or solving the task by sharing their "hard-earned" knowledge.

Many a time job insecurity acts as a causal factor for knowledge hiding. Individuals see their colleagues as an imminent threat and refrain from knowledge sharing. The knowledge hiding tendencies are also governed by the individual's personality traits and the level of emotional intelligence. All these critical factors if properly understood, analyzed, and mastered can prevent knowledge hiding in organizations before it turns out to be detrimental for the same. To conclude, it is also interesting to note that knowledge hiding is not always intended to harm others. Therefore, it can yield certain short-term dividends, but nevertheless, in the long run, it takes its own toll.

**Keywords:**  
Knowledge management,  
Task complexity,  
Knowledge hiding,  
Organizational behaviours,  
Deception,  
Distrust

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