DISENGAGEMENT FROM KNOWLEDGE SHARING: THE ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION FOR WHY PEOPLE ARE NOT SHARING

People not sharing their knowledge within the workplace constitute a problem for organizations. A recent study suggested there might be a behavior called Disengagement, where individuals neither share nor actively hoard/hide their knowledge. This qualitative study seeks to identify if such behavior does exist, and the underlying reasons for it.

Why don’t people share their knowledge with others at work? This question has been asked by practitioners and researchers alike (e.g., Connelly, Zweig, & Webster, 2006; Garfield, 2006; Stauffer, 1999). In response to this question, some researchers have focused on how to increase knowledge sharing behaviors (e.g., Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Elliott & O’Dell, 1999; Voelpel, Dous, & Davenport, 2005), while others have examined why individuals hoard or hide their knowledge (Connelly et al., 2006; Garfield, 2006; Hislop, 2003; Webster et al., 2008).

Yet, most of the discussion to date has assumed two things: (1) knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding exist along a single continuum, such that an individual is either sharing or is hoarding, or some degree of the two (for exceptions, see Connelly et al., 2006 and Webster et al., 2008); and (2) people are intentionally withholding their knowledge if they are not sharing it. These two assumptions result in the overlooking of a possible alternative behavior, disengagement from

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3 The author would like to thank Kasey Chaulk, Research Assistant, for her assistance in this research, and the anonymous reviewers for ASAC for their comments and suggestions.
knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding, where individuals are neither actively sharing their knowledge, nor are they actively hiding or hoarding their knowledge. In other words, they are silent and passive within the workplace when it comes to knowledge sharing and hoarding.

If this behavior exists with respect to knowledge sharing and hoarding, then it is likely that it would have separate predictors than knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding or hiding. Attempts to correct the lack of sharing by focusing on the enablers and barriers for either sharing or hoarding might not work for individuals exhibiting disengagement. Thus, the purpose of this research was threefold. First, I identified if disengagement from knowledge sharing is occurring within the workplace. Second, I examined whether or not disengagement is distinct from knowledge sharing, hiding and hoarding. Finally, I sought to identify possible predictors to disengagement.

In this paper, the literature on knowledge sharing, hiding, and hoarding are discussed briefly to illustrate how these behaviors differ, and the literature on disengagement from role performance is discussed. Then the methodology and results of a qualitative study are presented, along with implications for practitioners and future research.

Literature Review

Knowledge Sharing, Hoarding and Hiding Defined

Before the literature on disengagement is discussed, it is important to understand what are “knowledge sharing,” “knowledge hoarding,” and “knowledge hiding,” and how disengagement might relate to them. Knowledge sharing is a very popular research topic, yet despite this, the terminology has not been consistent or well-operationalized. Knowledge sharing is one of the knowledge management processes which include: knowledge creation/generation and knowledge acquisition, knowledge codification, knowledge sharing, which is similar to knowledge transfer, and knowledge use or application (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Liebowitz & Megbolugbe, 2003; Scarbrough, Swan, & Preston, 1999). Knowledge sharing is also one of the knowledge processes that constitutes the knowledge life cycle within an organization, specifically the diffusion of knowledge throughout the organization (Birkinshaw & Sheehan, 2002).
The first issue regarding the definition of knowledge sharing is its label. While some authors have used knowledge transfer, knowledge flows, and knowledge sharing as interchangeable terms, others contend they are different constructs. For example, Alavi and Leidner (2001) do not distinguish between knowledge transfer (the term they use) and knowledge sharing; neither do Davenport and Prusak (1998). Despite the lack of explicit differentiation, knowledge transfer is typically used to describe the movement of knowledge between organizations, knowledge flow is typically used to describe the movement of knowledge within an organization seen from an organizational perspective, whereas knowledge sharing is typically used to describe the movement of knowledge within an organization or between people (Ford & Staples, 2007a).

What is the definition of knowledge sharing? In discussion papers and studies, knowledge sharing has typically not been explicitly defined (Augier, Shariq, & Vendelo, 2001; Bock & Kim, 2002; Buckman, 1998; Chow, Deng, & Ho, 2000; Fraser, Marcella, & Middleton, 2000; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2000; Pan & Scarbrough, 1998; Stoddart, 2001). Despite the lack of definitions of knowledge sharing in studies, some authors do proceed to describe knowledge sharing and implicitly define it. For example, McLure Wasko and Faraj (2000, p. 156) state, “[I]ndividual learning and new knowledge creation occur when people combine and exchange their personal knowledge with others…. [T]here is a growing awareness of the importance of creating a systematic approach to knowledge sharing and the generation of knowledge flows.” In this regard knowledge sharing is related to knowledge flows within an organization and assists in the creation of new knowledge.

Buckman (1998, p. 11) states, “[W]e do not manage the knowledge in our associates’ heads. Instead, we have designed a system and built a culture that facilitates the communication of whatever is needed across all of the organization’s boundaries, so that the entire company works together to help everyone to be the best that they can be.” In this context, knowledge sharing is the communication of whatever is needed to help people be the best they can be, presumably in terms of their careers and jobs. This is a very broad definition of knowledge sharing, but it does illustrate that communication, whether it is via electronic means or face-to face, is an integral part of knowledge sharing.

Another point made by the above quotation is that the knowledge sharing occurs within the organization, anywhere in the organization. Fraser et al. (2000) also imply that knowledge sharing occurs with colleagues and that it too requires communication channels, either technology-based or technology-enabled. Alavi and Leidner (2001) define knowledge transfer (described to be the same as knowledge sharing) as a process by which knowledge diffuses throughout the organization and can occur between individuals, groups, or organizations. The diffusion of knowledge can occur through different types of channels, informal or formal and personal or impersonal (Holtham & Courtney, 1998, c.f., Alavi & Leidner, 2001). This description of knowledge transfer (i.e., knowledge sharing) illustrates several key points. First knowledge sharing involves an informer, whether an individual, a group, or an organization, a recipient, and a communication channel.
However, a couple of studies did provide an explicit definition of knowledge sharing (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Lee, 2001). Lee (2001, p. 324) defined knowledge sharing as “activities of transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group or organization to another. This definition broadly includes both tacit and explicit knowledge” [emphasis in original]. Connelly and Kelloway (2003) defined knowledge sharing as, “a set of behaviours that involve the exchange of information or assistance to other. It is separate from information sharing, which typically involves management making information on the organization available to employees. Whereas knowledge sharing contains an element of reciprocity, information sharing can be unidirectional and unrequested.” Information sharing in this definition is defined from the organizational viewpoint where management shares information to empower or inform employees.

Both of these definitions illustrate that knowledge sharing is a behaviour (or a set of behaviours), in which one actor (i.e., person, group, or organization) gives something (i.e., knowledge, information, assistance) to another. Another interesting aspect of these definitions is how Connelly and Kelloway (2003) differentiate knowledge sharing from information sharing. Information sharing, as described by Connelly and Kelloway (2003), is a managerial behaviour that is a top-down flow of information and is rarely requested by the recipient. They also add while knowledge sharing can be unsolicited it is more frequently requested than not. Furthermore, knowledge sharing can be bottom-up, lateral, or top-down within an organization. Other definitions of information sharing are more relaxed and consider any transference of information as information sharing. This type of definition of information sharing would be more comparable to knowledge sharing than the formal management behaviour of information sharing as described by Connelly and Kelloway (2003). Finally, Connelly and Kelloway’s (2003) definition implies that there is reciprocity, an exchange that occurs during knowledge sharing. While the literature does suggest that people share their knowledge because of the intrinsic benefits or potential future reciprocation of favors (i.e., anticipated reciprocity), it is not necessary for the recipient to share knowledge back at that exact moment, nor may they do so in the future.

Ford (2004) defined knowledge sharing as “the process by which an individual imparts his or her expertise, insight, or understanding to another individual, group, or knowledge repository so that the recipient may potentially acquire and, ideally, use the knowledge to perform his or her task(s) better” (p.2-3). This definition acknowledges the behavioural aspect of knowledge sharing, that it involves an informer and an intended recipient, and that there is the intention that this behaviour will result in, ideally, the two participants having the same knowledge. The definition implicitly includes both tacit and explicit knowledge; however, it does not imply that both are necessarily shared at the same time. It also includes contributing to knowledge repositories, where there is no one identified recipient rather the informer is sharing his/her knowledge with a generalized other, something that previous definitions have not specified (e.g., Lee, 2001).
Knowledge hoarding, on the other hand, has not been as popular as a dependent variable as knowledge sharing. Part of this is due to the assumption that knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding are antitheses to one another. As such, its definition would be the act of not sharing knowledge without any formal definition stated (Garfield, 2006; Stauffer, 1999). However, some researchers have started to focus on knowledge hoarding as a dependent variable, and it has been defined as, “the act of accumulating knowledge which may or may not be shared in the future (Hislop, 2003); that is, it is knowledge that has not necessarily been requested by another individual” (Webster et al., 2008, in press). In other words, knowledge hoarding is the amassing and protecting of knowledge as one might amass and protect other treasures. Webster et al. (2008) defined knowledge hiding as, “hiding represents concealing knowledge requested by another” (in press). In this regard, knowledge hiding appears to be a subset of knowledge hoarding, in that it relates to protecting knowledge that has been requested.

To muddy the waters one step further, there is also “partial knowledge sharing” and “partial knowledge hiding” where an individual shares some of his/her knowledge, but also withholds some relevant knowledge from the recipient for whatever reason, regardless of whether or not it has been requested (Ford & Staples, 2007a). Ford and Staples (2007a) suggests that partial knowledge sharing may be benevolent (to assist the recipient by preventing overload, or to protect confidentiality), or self-serving (to protect knowledge that the individual wants to hoard while still appearing to be sharing).

These behaviors appear as though they could exist along a single continuum from full knowledge sharing to full knowledge hiding (see Figure 1), which would support the first assumption that knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding are a single construct and these represent the extremes of the continuum. However, past research has illustrated that these behaviors load on separate factors and have distinct predictors (Connelly, Zweig, & Webster, 2007; Ford & Staples, 2007b). Similarly, the fourth behavior, disengaged, does not map meaningfully along this continuum.
While these multiple concepts seem related and, perhaps, excessively defined, Ford and Staples (2007a) presented a two-dimensional depiction of knowledge sharing and knowledge hoarding to clarify these many behaviors (see Figure 2). Within this two-dimensional space, at least four distinct behaviors become apparent: full knowledge sharing, partial knowledge sharing or partial knowledge hiding, full knowledge hiding, and disengaged. In their paper, Ford and Staples (2007a) actually present six behaviors with two more partial-like sharing behaviors (discretionary knowledge sharing and knowledge hinting); however, for the purpose of this paper I have simplified the two-dimensional space by excluding them.
Full knowledge sharing is characterized by high knowledge sharing and low knowledge hoarding; the individual fully shares all relevant knowledge to the recipient (Ford & Staples, 2007a). Partial knowledge sharing is characterized by high knowledge sharing and high knowledge hoarding; the individual withholds some relevant knowledge while consecutively sharing some knowledge (Connelly et al., 2006; Ford & Staples, 2007a). Active knowledge hoarding is characterized by high knowledge hoarding and low knowledge sharing; an individual withholds all of the relevant knowledge (Ford & Staples, 2007a). Finally, disengagement is characterized by low knowledge sharing and low knowledge hoarding; the individual neither seeks to share their knowledge nor hoard it (Ford & Staples, 2007a).

If disengagement exists for knowledge sharing and hoarding, then this would further support the arguments that knowledge sharing and hoarding are not a single construct existing on a single dimension; rather, they are separate constructs as proposed by Connelly et al. (2007) and Ford and Staples (2007a).

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4 Adapted from Ford & Staples (2007).
Disengagement

While disengagement has not been discussed within the knowledge management literature to date, it is not a new construct and has been investigated within the Organizational Behaviour field to explain why individuals become engaged versus disengaged from their job or organization (e.g., Christian & Slaughter, 2007; Kahn, 1990, 1992; Saks, 2006; Sonnentag, 2003). Engagement has been defined as, “the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s ‘preferred self’ in task behaviors that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active, full role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). It is portrayed as being fully present as oneself while simultaneously fulfilling one’s role within the organization. In this scenario, the individual is not withholding or protecting himself/herself. S/he is energetically, emotionally and psychologically present as performing his/her role.

Conversely, Kahn (1990) defined disengagement as, “the simultaneous withdrawal and defense of a person’s preferred self in behaviors that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performances… To defend the self is to hide true identity thoughts, and feelings during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 701). Disengagement is seen as a lack of energy, emotion and thought and is characterized by passive, incomplete role-performances (Kahn, 1990). It is the removal of the essence of the person from their role, perhaps appearing robotic and impersonal; they become role custodians rather than role innovators (van Maanen & Schein, 1979, cf. Kahn, 1990).

To date, research on engagement and disengagement has focused on individuals’ roles within the organization. Rothbard (2001) suggests that individuals play multiple roles within an organization, and Saks (2006) argues that “research should examine engagement in multiple roles within the organization” (p. 604). While engagement has not been examined with respect to knowledge sharing per se, it is possible that individuals may play the role of informer, educator, mentor, catalyst for problem solving, or knowledge broker within the organization, in which knowledge sharing is critical for role-performance. To the extent to which one of these roles is a role an individual has within the organization (either formally or informally), then engagement and disengagement is relevant for knowledge sharing.

Within the engagement/disengagement literature, there have been several antecedents discussed and examined. Kahn (1990) proposed three determinants for engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability. For example, to the extent that the role and job have meaning for the individual, s/he will become more engaged than if there is no meaning or significance for him/her. Similarly, if
individuals are going to express their true self cognitively, physically and emotionally, then this requires that they perceive that no harm will come to them for doing so and that it is safe to do so. Finally, people need to have the availability of physical, emotional and psychological resources (i.e., availability). If they are sick or worried about other matters, they will not have the resources available to be present and engaged in their role (Kahn, 1992). These could also be determinants for disengagement in terms of knowledge sharing.

In a meta-analysis, Saks (2006) found that job characteristics (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1980), perceived organizational support (e.g., Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001) and procedural justice (e.g., Colquitt, 2001) were positively associated with engagement (i.e., organizational engagement and job engagement) as antecedents. These could be possible antecedents to disengagement in terms of knowledge sharing.

The outcomes of job engagement were: higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, lower intentions to quit, and higher organizational citizenship behaviors which were targeted to the organization (Saks, 2006). The outcomes of organizational engagement were: higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, lower intentions to quit, and higher organizational citizenship behaviors which were targeted to the organization and to individuals (Saks, 2006). The implication of these findings that organizational engagement can be related to sharing knowledge as one of the components of OCB-I is: “Willingly give your time to help others who have work-related problems” (Saks, 2006, p. 619). Sharing knowledge would aid in solving others’ work-related problems. However, Saks did not investigate engagement with respect to informer, educator, mentor, catalyst for problem solving, or knowledge broker within the organization roles as these may fall outside the formal job role and are more specific than engagement in the organization.

Thus, an interview-based study was done to address the following research questions:

1) Does disengagement from knowledge sharing exist within organizations, such that there is a lack of sharing, but also a lack of voluntarily withholding of knowledge? If so, to what extent does it occur?
2) How does disengagement from knowledge sharing relate to disengagement from role performance?
3) What are the causes of disengagement from knowledge sharing?
Methodology

An interview-based study was conducted from May, 2007 to July, 2007. A total of 28 knowledge workers (36% male, 64% female; ages ranged from approximately 25-65) were interviewed either over the telephone or in-person. Knowledge workers were defined as: *individuals who use information or knowledge as a primary input or output of their jobs*. All participants were employed adults, working in Canada. The participants were from a variety of industries: Education (40%), Health Services (20%), Finance (10%), Construction & Mining (10%), Governmental Services (7%), Environmental & Agricultural (7%), Consulting (3%) and Information Technology (3%). There was a variety of job titles within each industry. For Education, participants were assistant professors (10%), associate professor (3%) to full professors (10%), teachers (14%) to principal (7%). Other titles included: manager (10%), analyst (10%), health practitioner (nurse, dietician, physiotherapist) (10%), training manager (7%), business owner (7%), executive assistant (7%), researcher (3%), and professional engineer (3%). Despite the diversity in the titles and industries, a common theme to nearly all of the participants was that training, educating or informing others formed a major component of their job. Convergence was achieved after 18 interviews; however, an additional 10 interviews were sought to confirm the convergence.

All interviews were recorded with consent, and subsequently transcribed. Each interview question was then examined to identify themes. A list of themes was developed for each question from the transcripts; the themes emerged from the transcripts and were not predetermined. Then the list was examined to remove redundancies. Frequencies and examples of the themes were pulled from the transcripts. Due to space limitations, however, direct quotation examples will not be reported in this version of the paper.

Results

To start the interviews, participants were asked to define what “knowledge” meant to them. The purpose of this question was to ground the discussion. All of the participants, except for one, used multiple dimensions to define knowledge (2-4 dimensions were used). The one participant who used a single dimension defined knowledge as acquired learning. There were a total of five definitional themes (dimensions) given in the participants’ responses:

- Defined by source (25/28) – for example, experience (12/28), education (10/28),
- Defined by analogy (21/28) – for example, understanding (10/28), acquired learning (5/28), power (3/28), awareness (3/28),
- Defined by Information (17/28) – for example, knowledge is more than information (10/28), or knowledge is information (7/28),
• Defined by action (14/28) – for example, application (7/28), helps to get things (3/28), and
• Defined by Body/Being (3/28) – for example, knowledge is etched into our being (1), it is the
total sum of brain activity (1).

The next question asked participants if they shared their knowledge at work, and if it was
formally required. This question was asked to ascertain whether or not knowledge sharing constituted
role performance or if it would be a citizenship behavior (extra-role performance). The majority of the
participants identified knowledge sharing as a task performance (15/28 – 53.6%). Of these 15
individuals, 11 stated that they did share their knowledge, 3 individuals identified that they usually
shared their knowledge but that sometimes they do not share it, and one individual stated that while
sharing knowledge is a part of her job, she does not do it. For these individuals disengagement from
knowledge sharing would constitute disengagement from part of their job role within the organization.

Knowledge sharing was considered to be an extra-role performance for nine participants
(32.1%). Of these nine individuals, seven still shared their knowledge thus exhibiting organizational
citizenship behaviors, while two individuals did not participate in these extra-role behaviors. For these
individuals, disengagement from knowledge sharing would constitute disengagement from extra-roles in
the organization, not from their job roles.

Finally, there were four individuals (14.3%) who were characterized by ambivalent behavior and
expectations in that they were not sure if knowledge sharing was a part of their job formally, and they
were inconsistent in sharing their knowledge (sometimes sharing and sometimes not sharing).

Participants were then asked to think of a time when they found themselves less involved at
work, in particular, not sharing their knowledge with others. They were asked to describe it and then
discuss what was happening at that time. Follow-up questions were asked to probe deeper into their
answers and to examine possible reasons for their lack of sharing. Two participants were unable to
identify a time when they were less involved and did not share their knowledge with others. The
remaining 26 participants were able to offer examples, three of whom offered two examples. The
examples were analyzed to identify which type of behavior it illustrated (i.e., disengagement, knowledge
hoarding, or partial knowledge sharing). There were 20 examples (69.0%) of disengagement, 5
examples (17.2%) of hoarding, and 4 examples (13.8%) of partial knowledge sharing. In their
descriptions of the events, possible reasons for the lack of sharing were given. (See Table 3 for a
summary of types of behaviors with frequencies and the spontaneous reasons for not sharing.)
Table 3

Reasons for Examples of Not Sharing Knowledge at Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for Not Sharing Knowledge</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disengaged Examples</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation (not known/outsider, no one in area, area not understood by organization, isolated setting – offices)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Busy / time conflict (new, ‘plow through task,’ seeped into work, tight for time)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy (needed a break, less vibrant, Monday Malaise, dog-tired, illness)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential Recipient Issues (disinterest, no need, language)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not intentionally not sharing, just happens</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/Life Strain (times of trial, young children at home)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing is a low priority</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wading through the experience, bored</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opportunity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential shame (“Why didn’t I know this before?”)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal trait (not loquacious)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hoarding Examples</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense mechanism (felt attacked, protect power)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitive work term (expected to leave the organization soon)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is expected / wanted by organization for me to <strong>not</strong> share.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recipient is a know-it-all.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partial Hiding Examples</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the follow-up questions, participants were asked to think of other reasons as to why they might not be sharing. Specifically, they were asked if there was anything occurring at the same time in the following areas: organizational factors, job-related factors, life outside of work factors, physical or emotional health factors, and any other possible factors not yet discussed. Then they were asked if these events or factors impacted their knowledge sharing behaviors. (See Table 4 for a summary of the factors.)

Organizational factors were not a factor for 13 participants. For seven participants, organizational factors were leading to a decrease in knowledge sharing. Examples of these organizational factors were a poor organizational culture or morale, a mobile workforce policy (e.g., everyone can do every job), disagreement with policies, and a powerful union. Other organizational factors were associated with an increase of knowledge sharing, such as: change in organizational structure, and organizational dysfunction. Some organizational factors increased knowledge sharing for some participants while decreased knowledge sharing for others, such as: mergers and outsourcing, new leadership, and renovations/changes in workspace.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Factors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7 (decrease KS) &amp; 8 (increase KS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job-Related Factors</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19 (decrease KS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Outside Work Factors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15 (decrease KS)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The remaining factors were all associated with decreases in knowledge sharing. “Job-related factors” was the most predominant factor impacting 19 out of 28 participants (67.9%). Specifically, “job-related factors” included the following examples: workload issues, job characteristics (e.g., isolating job, schedules, low autonomy, poor training/ability), injustice (denied promotion, bad job evaluations, denied acknowledgement of contract work tenure), confidentiality, learned helplessness (ineffective KS in the past), new to the organization, and boredom.

“Life outside of work” and “physical or emotional health” factors affected the same number of participants (53.6% each). The most frequent issue which would result in a decrease in knowledge sharing for “life outside of work” was dependents’ needs (e.g., injuries, sick, at home, or death), followed by simply having young children and parental leave. Extracurricular activities, marital problems, and establishing or maintaining a house/home completed the list. “Physical or emotional health factors” included issues such as illness (predominantly cancer), stress, tired or depleted energy, lack of mental clarity, crankiness, pregnancy (and the associated fatigue primarily, but also the nausea), and headaches.

The “Other Reasons” listed by individuals could be characterized as either personal reasons, which had to do with the individual himself or herself, or factors associated with other people as to why others do not share their knowledge. Again, all of these reasons were associated with a decrease in sharing. Personal reasons included:

- Lack of trust with the recipient (4),
- Isolation (physical, mental) (3),
- It doesn’t come up in conversation (3),
- Low self-confidence in knowledge (not valued by others) (2),
- No recognition for sharing (credit stealing) (2),
- The potential recipient won’t ask for help, even though the potential informer knows they need the knowledge (1),
- Low investment in organization due to short-term contract (2), and
- Can’t be everything to everyone (1).
Reasons attributed to why other people do not share their knowledge included:

- Protecting oneself (knowledge is power and control, fear of a missed opportunity, credit stealing) (8),
- Personal trait (personality, paranoid) (2),
- Person likes being the source of the knowledge (1), and
- People think they can find the knowledge themselves, so don’t ask/don’t want help (1).

Finally, participants were asked how they coped during these times of disengagement from knowledge sharing. The answers were analyzed with relation to the key factors that were occurring at the time (organizational, job, work-life, and health) to identify if any further trends appeared. (See Table 5 for a summary of the results.)

**Table 5**

Summary of Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not volunteer the knowledge, but would share if asked.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organ’l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defer the sharing to a later date/time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refer to the individual to someone else.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triage Job Duties (change tasks’ priorities).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go into survival mode, and do just what has to be done to get by.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self becomes #1 priority (job tasks are not a priority).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most common tactics employed were to be absent from work (14), defer sharing to a later date and time (13), apply triage rules to job duties or change tasks’ priorities (13), and not volunteer the knowledge (10). It is apparent from these tactics that there is a range of degrees of disengagement. The least disengaged is quiet reserve of not volunteering; however, there is no withholding if the knowledge is requested. This tactic was most popular when the participant’s health was sub-par. Similarly, the deferral to another time indicates that the disengagement can be short-lived, and again is most popular when health is a factor, but also when work-life issues are present.

Applying “job duties triage” or “going into survival mode” imply that the in-role behaviors get more attention than extra-role behaviors, such as knowledge sharing (for some participants). While changing tasks’ priorities is a response for all factors, the survival mode is not a response for organizational factors. Similarly, participants noted changing their priorities; however, making themselves the priority instead of job tasks. This was a tactic used equally for job-related factors, work-life factors and health factors.

The last two tactics are at the other end of the disengagement continuum, where the individual appears to disengage physically from the workplace, either temporarily as seen by absenteeism or permanently. This withdrawal is the ultimate disengagement from knowledge sharing, but also disengagement from the organization (temporarily or permanently). However, an interesting trend is that the work-life and health factors were associated with a temporary absence, whereas, organizational and job factors appeared to be associated with permanent withdrawals from the organization.

**Discussion**

This study sought to address three research questions. Does disengagement from knowledge sharing exist within organizations, such that there is a lack of sharing, but also a lack of voluntarily withholding of knowledge? If so, to what extent does it occur? How does disengagement from knowledge sharing relate to disengagement from role performance? What are the causes of disengagement from knowledge sharing?
The results of this study suggest that the previously held assumption that either people share their knowledge or they intentionally hoard it (actively withhold it) is not the full truth. This research suggests that there are separate behaviors: full knowledge sharing (which was not the focus of this research), partial knowledge sharing/hiding, knowledge hoarding, and disengagement. Partial knowledge sharing/hiding is where the individual shares some knowledge but simultaneously actively withholds some knowledge. This may be for different reasons, like confidentiality constraints, the recipient’s inability to understand or they were not asked for more and it was not volunteered. It accounted for approximately 13% of the examples of less involvement in knowledge sharing.

Knowledge hoarding is characterized by the active withholding of knowledge. Again the reasons for this range from it was wanted and expected by the organization, it is a defense mechanism, or due to a lack of investment in the organization. It accounted for approximately 17% of the examples of less involvement in knowledge sharing. Interestingly, the majority of these were in response to organizational expectations or desires for the individual to withhold the knowledge. Only 7% of the examples were of a more personal-opportunistic nature.

Disengagement is also characterized by a lack of knowledge sharing; however, it is less intentional than hoarding. It is characterized by a deferring of the request to another time, a physical withdrawal from work, and a reprioritization of tasks, others and self. The reasons for disengagement tend to be: isolation, being too busy and experiencing time conflicts, low energy, recipient disinterest/language/lack of need, “it just happens [or doesn’t happen]”, work-life strain (e.g., young children at home), sharing is a low priority, there is no opportunity, the individual is just “wading through the experience” or is bored, and personal traits (e.g., not loquacious or gregarious). Disengagement accounted for approximately 70% of the examples of decrease of involvement in knowledge sharing.

Why has hoarding been assumed to be so prevalent within the workforce? The results from this research suggest a couple of possible reasons as to why it has been assumed that knowledge hoarding is a problem within the workplace. First, it is possible that practitioners and researchers are mislabeling disengagement as hoarding. Since all but two of the participants (93%) could identify a time that would have been characteristic of disengagement during the interview, it is likely that, if mislabeled as hoarding, it would appear as though nearly everyone hoards knowledge at one point or another.

Another possible reason why it has been assumed that hoarding is a problem within the workplace has to do with how people attribute the underlying causes and motives of other people versus themselves. There are attribution errors that can occur. The first attribution error is called the
fundamental attribution error, in which people tend to blame the individual rather than take into consideration contextual/external factors (e.g., Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Another type of attribution error is called the sinister attribution error, which is defined as, “a pattern of misattribution characterized by irrational distrust (Kramer, 1994), wherein individuals misperceive the behavior of others and are overly suspicious of their intentions given the objective circumstances” (Main, Dahl, & Darke, 2007, p. 59). This was reflected somewhat in the interviews when reasons for why others did not share tended to be less favorable motives or character traits, and tended to propose more hoarding-like behavior than disengaging behaviors. It should be noted that participants also identified these types of people are a rarity, not the norm.

Disengagement from knowledge sharing appeared to be related, albeit separate from disengagement from role performance. For some participants, knowledge sharing was an explicit component of their job, thus disengagement from knowledge sharing did constitute disengagement from job performance. However, it appeared to be a precursor to full job disengagement as individuals would still carry out their other job tasks for the most part and reprioritize them during that timeframe. Under extreme circumstances, individuals would be fully disengaged from their jobs as they would be physically absent from the workplace, either temporarily or permanently.

For other individuals, disengagement from knowledge sharing was separate from job disengagement as knowledge sharing was an extra-role behavior for them. In this case, disengagement appeared to be a re-focusing of efforts towards the job itself, or themselves, personally.

Finally, the causes of disengagement from knowledge sharing were examined. Determinants emerged from the transcripts. As noted earlier, Kahn (1990) proposed three determinants for engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability. Similarly, Saks (2006) found that job characteristics, perceived organizational support, and procedural justice were positively associated with engagement (i.e., organizational engagement and job engagement) as antecedents. When the determinants from the study are compared to the ones identified in the literature, some similarities become apparent.

The first determinant, safety, was not well represented by the results in this study. When participants noted safety issues, such as lack of trust with the recipient, no recognition for sharing or risk of credit stealing, the associated behaviors tended to be more along with active withholding of knowledge like partial knowledge sharing or active knowledge hoarding, not disengagement. One reason noted by some participants, which could be considered a safety issue, was that they were new to the organization. While a part of being new was that they were busy trying to learn the ropes (which
would influence availability, not safety) another component was that they did not want to rock the boat or were unsure that their comments would be well-received. Thus safety might be a determinant for disengagement; although it appears to be a stronger factor for hoarding behaviors.

Saks (2006) included perceived organizational support as an example of safety within the workplace. He argued that supportive supervisor relations has been found to be associated with psychological safety (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). However, in this study, there were no comments that could be considered as examples of perceived organizational support or supportive supervisor relations. The closest to it was comments regarding the organizational culture and the morale within organizations, but the specifics of it were much vaguer than direct supervisor support. A couple of participants did note that when they were battling cancer, the support from their colleagues and supervisor did help them, but it did not alter their disengagement during their bout with cancer. It is possible that this support during the health crisis may have staved off further disengagement upon return to normal duties; however, this is speculative. Future research should examine what role perceived organizational support has in terms of its direct role with disengagement and its possible role as a moderator.

The second determinant, meaningfulness (operationalized as job characteristics by Saks, 2006), was represented by the results in this study. Specifically, the level of autonomy was associated with disengagement, such that low autonomy was associated with more disengagement. Similarly, boredom was associated with higher rates of disengagement. Thus, while meaningfulness was represented, it was not a strong determinant to disengagement as compared to the third determinant, availability.

Availability was a very strong determinant of disengagement in terms of knowledge sharing and hoarding. The majority of the reasons revolved around the concept of having sufficient resources, either physical, emotional, or psychological resources. Examples of physical resources were the following: physical isolation from colleagues, either by physical distance or by time and schedules; health factors such as being sick with cancer, being tired due to a pregnancy, sleep deprived due to having a baby at home or general fatigue; or time constraints where it was physically impossible to do the rest of the job and share knowledge as well.

Emotional resources were illustrated by comments regarding stress, having marital problems or problems with children at home. For example, one participant recalled a day that a child of his went missing. The child was ultimately found that day, but in the meantime, he was completely unavailable to work in any capacity. Some participants noted that experiencing times of trial left them with less
ability to share their knowledge with others at work. While they might want to, they did not have the capacity to do so.

Finally, psychological resources were also illustrated in the reasons for being disengaged. Many participants noted that being too busy in other areas of work left them no time to think about sharing. Another participant noted that actually having a lighter teaching load one term and having just finished her PhD at the same time, allowed her to have a “breather” where she did not have to think anymore. Instead, thoughts about ways to set up her new home pervaded her time.

Saks (2006) argued that perceived justice was an indicator of resources in that distributive justice determined the distribution of resources. To that end, the results of this study were examined to see if organizational justice (in particular, distributive justice) were represented. Three participants had noted that injustice within the workplace was associated with a decrease in their knowledge sharing. Two were characteristic of distributive justice: one denied promotion, and one denied acknowledgement of contract work tenure. From these two examples, the one who was denied promotion did experience a decrease in knowledge sharing; however, it was not a general decrease in sharing. Rather, it was a more intentional withholding of knowledge, thus fits in with partial knowledge sharing and active knowledge hoarding, not disengagement. The other scenario did come with a general waning of sharing, but was not an intentional withholding. Thus, it could be associated with disengagement.

A final scenario of injustice was due to a bad job performance evaluation. This participant noted that while it led to a general slump in response, eventually he got over it, and improved his performance. During this slump period, though, there was a decrease in sharing. Again, it was not deliberate or retaliatory, but could illustrate a decrease in emotional availability.

Finally, there was a reason for disengagement that does not fit cleanly in with the three determinants suggested by Kahn (1990), personality. One participant noted that he does not have a loquacious personality, thus he tends to not share a lot of his knowledge with co-workers. It is not that he does not share nor does he hoard his knowledge, but his tendency is to not share. Personality factors could impact perceptions of safety, meaningfulness and availability; however, this should be examined further by future research.

Future research should confirm the existence of disengagement from sharing and hoarding to see if the frequencies noted in this research are representative within the general workforce. Similarly,
the relative importance of the determinants listed here should be confirmed. Future research could also examine the relationship between disengagement from knowledge sharing and job disengagement and organizational disengagement. It would be interesting to see if there is a progression model of disengagement, similar to Koslowsky’s (2000) progression model of absenteeism to turnover.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the findings in this study provide initial support to the supposition that disengagement from knowledge sharing and hoarding does exist, and they provide strong impetus for testing the claim in other studies. The results also suggest that the majority of individuals do not share their knowledge at some point in time, but that it is not an intentional behavior as assumed by previous research. The results from this research suggest that researchers need to separate hoarding from disengagement to understand them better.

The mislabeling of disengagement as hoarding has led to the ineffectual “cures” promoted in the literature. This study illustrates the importance of availability for preventing disengagement. If disengagement is far more prevalent within the workforce than active hoarding, which this research suggests, then organizations would benefit more diminishing isolation, reducing workloads (without risking boredom), offering employee assistance programs, wellness programs and more flexible work arrangements to aid in the management of work-life balance, and physical and emotional health, rather than focusing on ways to get the rare person to stop hoarding their knowledge.

Future research needs to be conducted to develop a measure to test to what extent disengagement from knowledge sharing is occurring, and what increases disengagement and what can decrease it. This research is an important step as it identified the disengagement and possible reasons for it occurring.
References


