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# Knowledge Sharing in the Workplace by Employees at Different Stages of Seniority – the Results of a Study among Polish Managerial Staff

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the issue of knowledge sharing by employees at different stages of seniority and has two aims: a cognitive one and an empirical one. The cognitive aim is to provide a synthesizing presentation of selected models of knowledge organization. The context shall be a concept of the functioning of employees of varying seniority developed by one of the Authors of the paper. The empirical aim is to answer the question: Is there a correlation between employees' level of seniority and their knowledge sharing level? In order to achieve the empirical aim, a survey was conducted among 58 Polish managers from 13 medium-sized enterprises who assessed knowledge sharing of 272 employees by means of the validated *Questionnaire on the characteristics of employees of varying seniority*. The study revealed that there is a correlation between employees' knowledge sharing level and their seniority levels (which, however, fades after 14 years of employment).

KEYWORDS: seniority levels, knowledge, knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing strategies, managerial staff

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STRESZCZENIE

Dzielenie się wiedzą wśród pracowników o zróżnicowanym stażu organizacyjnym – wyniki badań przeprowadzonych wśród polskiej kadry menedżerskiej

Przedmiotem opracowania jest problematyka dzielenia się wiedzą wśród osób o zróżnicowanym stażu organizacyjnym. Opracowanie realizuje dwa cele: poznawczy i empiryczny. Poznawczym celem jest syntetyczne zaprezentowanie modeli organizacji wiedzy w kontekście autorskiej koncepcji funkcjonowania pracowników o zróżnicowanym stażu organizacyjnym. Empiryczny cel to uzyskanie odpowiedzi na pytanie: czy jest zależność między stażem organizacyjnym pracowników a poziomem dzielenia się wiedzą? Aby zrealizować cel empiryczny, zaplanowano badanie, w którym uczestniczyło 58 przedstawicieli polskiej kadry kierowniczej z 13 średniej wielkości przedsiębiorstw. Oceniali oni poziom dzielenia się wiedzy łącznie 272 pracowników za pomocą skali zwalidowanego kwestionariusza charakterystyki pracowników o zróżnicowanym stażu pracy. W wyniku przeprowadzonych badań okazało się, że istnieje zależność między poziomem dzielenia się wiedzą a stażem pracy pracowników posiadających dłuższe doświadczenie organizacyjne, jednak zależność ta nie występuje w przypadku osób o stażu organizacyjnym powyżej 14 lat.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: staż organizacyjny, wiedza, dzielenie się wiedzą, strategie dzielenia się wiedzą, kadra kierownicza

## Introduction

There is no doubt that neither the development of organizations, institutions, and people nor investment in human capital would be possible without knowledge. Unquestionably, the process of passing information first orally and next in writing (both in handwritten and printed forms) made it possible to preserve and consolidate knowledge in past civilizations. Today, knowledge sharing is important also in the area of increasing the productivity of human work in enterprises by allowing employees to gain a fuller understanding of the world around them. On the other hand, discovering the determinants of employees' motivation to share the knowledge they possess with others seems equally significant. The analysis of the literature and the Authors' practical experience justify the assumption that employees' seniority in an organization is one of such determinants (Hersch, Reagan, 1999; Ipe, 2003; Gosseries, 2004; Cabrera, Collins and Salgado, 2006; Argote, Ingram, Levine, et al., 2000; Ellwart, Bündgens and Rack, 2013; Burmeister, Deller, 2016; Burmeister, Fasbender and Deller,

2018; Hilsen, Sutherland Olsen, 2021), as seniority affects relationships within an organization and constitutes a "carrier" of knowledge sharing. The study has two aims: a cognitive one and an empirical one. The cognitive aim is to provide a synthesizing presentation of selected models of knowledge organization. The context for this shall be the concept of the functioning of employees at different stages of seniority developed by one of the Authors. The empirical aim is to answer the question: Is there a correlation between employees' level of seniority and their knowledge sharing level?

## Theoretical considerations

### *The concept of knowledge sharing*

In order to achieve success and develop a competitive advantage, organizations heavily depend on knowledge they have at their disposal, as it is a valuable resource and a crucial success factor (Grant, 1996; Nahapiet, Ghoshal, 1998; Civi, 2000; Bollinger, Smith, 2001; Debowski, 2005; Yi, 2009). The reason for the increase in the importance of knowledge is primarily due to the fact that the effective management and sharing of knowledge in an organization has many positive outcomes.

Knowledge is the foundation of innovation and long-term success of an organization (Kogut, Zander, 1992; Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995; Drucker, 1999; Cumming, 2003; Massa, Testa, 2009; Price, et al., 2013). Effective and wise use of knowledge accumulated in an organization and employees' sharing of this knowledge with others lead to increased productivity and efficiency as well as an ability to create new solutions and develop both an entire organization and its competitive advantage (Sharkie, 2003; Kearns, Lederer, 2003; Cummings, 2004; Lin, 2007; Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch, 2009; Wang, Noe, 2010).

For the first time knowledge sharing as a concept was used in 1977, when it was called *technology transfer*. The term *knowledge transfer* was coined almost twenty years later (in 1996) (Paulin, Suenson, 2012, pp. 82-92). Today, the terms commonly used in the literature are *knowledge sharing* and *knowledge diffusion/transfer* (Fazlagić, 2014, p. 2).

The analysis of knowledge sharing is related to specific competences which "people must learn to tell others what they know to attract their attention" (Suuela, Markkula, Mustajarvi, 2002, pp. 79-80), while the dissemination of knowledge requires interactions between the participants of a conversation or discussion who aim at a certain level of mutual understanding, which affects the ways in which people think and behave. Rogers

believes that the dissemination of knowledge involves innovation, transfer channels, time, people, and communities (Rogers, 1983, as cited in Suuela, Markkula, Mustajarvi, 2002, p. 80).

The most effective transfer of knowledge takes place during school education, which is based on specific curricula, divided into subjects, and occurs in a school building (Sammons, 2005, p. 80). However, it would be difficult to apply this very method of transferring knowledge in organizations whose strategic goals differ from those pursued in educational institutions.

There is no doubt that knowledge sharing in an enterprise increases its productivity. Carriers of knowledge include employees, particular organizational units, and entire organizations. Such authors as Desouza, Awazu, and Finkelstein (Desouza, Awazu, 2005; Finkelstein, 2005) point to the following consequences of insufficient knowledge sharing in an organization:

- waste of resources resulting from doing work already done by others or dealing with the same problem by employees from several organizational units
- extension of time needed for project implementation
- conflicts in supply chains
- employees' emotional problems, which negatively affect their relationships with others
- diffusion of responsibility for project execution.

## *Knowledge sharing strategies*

Jan Fazlagić (2014, pp. 113-115) is of the opinion that despite a rapidly growing use of increasingly convenient and, at the same time, diverse applications and social networking sites, the most effective tool for knowledge sharing is still *a cup of coffee*. Direct contact of two or more persons and their mutual interactions during an informal meeting allow them to clarify a number of doubts, provide inspiration, and release positive energy, which creates good mood and fosters creative thinking (Lewicka,1993).

Fazlagić distinguishes two strategies for knowledge sharing. One is the oldest *strategy of personalizing knowledge*, connected with direct relations in the process of communication, interactions taking place during a conversation, observation, and accompanying an experienced master. The second one is a specific *strategy of codifying knowledge*, which emerged after the introduction of writing (and printing) and takes place while studying books, documents, letters, and regulations.

Table 1. Strategies of personalizing and codifying knowledge

| **Evaluation criteria** | **Strategy of personalizing knowledge** | **Strategy of codifying knowledge** |
|---|---|---|
| **Definition** | It is a strategy of exchanging information and thoughts focused on direct relations and dialogue. | The codification of knowledge is a process of the transformation of knowledge from employees' minds to documents. |
| **Application from the perspective of knowledge** | This strategy can be used in companies that owe their success to the creativity of particular employees and their loyalty to their company understood as a "social network" (Morawiecka, 2013).<br>This strategy is usually integrated with the organizational culture; it implements an individualistic orientation directed at employees' development and promotion of their entrepreneurship and independence in thinking (Pawlak, 2015). | It can be applied in companies in which relatively routine processes are performed (e.g. in retail banking). The development of knowledge occurs as a result of the modification of existing knowledge, e.g. by its updating. Thereby specific corporate knowledge is created, which can be used by employees of a given organization. |
| **Philosophical assumptions and premises** | Knowledge is most effectively shared through dialogue and in direct contacts between people. People are able to pass information, explain their thoughts, give them the right context, and process them in an appropriate manner. | Knowledge is most effectively shared through documents. Codification of knowledge means that information about who owns knowledge becomes widely available. |
| **Limitations and benefits** | Limitations of personalizing knowledge:<br>The workload required to transform knowledge into documents. This process is not always successful due to the fact that some parts of the codified knowledge belong to the category of tacit knowledge<br>An attempt to codify knowledge may lead to "the centipede effect"[1] | Benefits of codifying knowledge:<br>Increased transparency of business processes, which makes them more understandable to all stakeholders and allows easier control over the supply chain<br>Transparency and the publication of various indexes in a company is particularly appreciated by shareholders in companies listed on a stock exchange |

1 K. Popper used the term the centipede effect to denote conscious control and tracking of an activity, which eventually leads to its blocking. He referred to a fable in which a centipede asked by a spider how it manages to use a hundred legs at the same time, immediately loses control of its body (as cited in Fazlagić, 2014, p. 38) Thus, an excess of conscious control can paralyze action.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Reduced significance of specialists, experts, and scientists caused by spreading the belief that all knowledge can be codified and that anybody can learn anything by studying<br>The need to store codified knowledge requires the creation of *knowledge about knowledge* or *metaknowledge* | Employees have a greater sense of security in workplaces with numerous procedures, regulations, and instructions<br>Because knowledge remains in the company, the effects of high turnover can be reduced<br>Receiving codified knowledge facilitates the work of units which cooperate with internal and external clients |
| **Links with the HRM strategy** | Hiring people motivated to solve problems and understand ambiguity in their work<br>Promoting experienced employees<br>Providing rewards for sharing knowledge with others<br>Conducting individual trainings | Recruitment process focused on searching for people who use knowledge in a reproductive way<br>Rewarding employees for making use of collective knowledge<br>Mobilizing employees to use ready-made documents and to develop their own documents<br>Conducting group trainings |
| **Application of IT** | It would be useful to create networks and discussion forums for people with unique expert knowledge and use this knowledge to solve unusual problems. Therefore, it is more important to create opportunities for genuine discussions between specialists than to invest in IT infrastructure. | It seems useful to create a system that will become a network of an organization's links, like the neural network, which will allow employees to use it repeatedly and to return to previously accumulated knowledge. |

Source: own elaboration based on Fazlagić (2014, pp. 114-116)

Usually, both strategies are implemented in companies, although mangers' awareness of the preferred strategy and consistency in its application are crucial for more effective management.

## Models of knowledge organization

### *The SECI model*

Several models of knowledge organization are described in the literature and used in human capital management. These models explain the dynamics of the creation of knowledge in an organization.

One of the best known models of knowledge sharing in an enterprise is the SECI model (SECI is an acronym of Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization), developed by Japanese researchers in the mid-1990s (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995, 2000). Its main feature is the relationship between explicit and tacit knowledge, and it presents the process of knowledge creation in organizations: creation, flow of knowledge (its transfer), and reproduction. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi, tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge, and explicit knowledge can be converted into tacit knowledge.

Conversion of knowledge takes place in the following directions:

1. From tacit knowledge to tacit knowledge, which is called socialization.
2. From tacit knowledge to explicit (available) knowledge, which is called externalization.
3. From explicit knowledge to explicit knowledge, which is called combination.
4. From explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge, which is called internalization.

For these stages of converting knowledge to take place, an organization should create conditions that motivate employees to share their knowledge (which can be achieved through, e.g. integrating employees' goals with company goals, offering employees sufficient autonomy, tolerating "creative chaos" and ambiguity of tasks to be implemented) as well as to reduce barriers to knowledge sharing (which can be achieved through e.g. skillful conflict management and prevention, increasing computer literacy of experienced employees, and creating such organizational culture that is conductive to knowledge sharing).[2]

In this model, knowledge is not only of individual nature but also of group, organizational, and inter-organizational nature, thus interactions between the organization's levels are crucial. At the end of the 1990s, the SECI model was modified by Nonaka and Konno and supplemented with the Ba concept, developed by a Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida and later elaborated on by Shimizu (as cited in Łapniewska 2013, p. 5). Explicit and tacit knowledge interact within Ba, which contributes to the creation of new knowledge.

2 Cf. Fazlagić, J. (2014). Innowacyjne zarządzanie wiedzą, Difin, Warszawa, p. 118.

Figure 1. Adaptation of Ba to the SECI model. Nonaka's model of knowledge conversion

| | |
|---|---|
| **SOCIALISATION**<br>*Originating Ba* | **EXTERNALISATION**<br>*Interacting Ba* |
| **INTERNALISATION**<br>*Exercising Ba* | **COMBINATION**<br>*Cyber Ba* |

Source: http://www.emeraldinsight.com, accessed: 22.06.2017, as cited in Krugiełka, 2019, p. 147.

There are four types of Ba which correspond to the four stages of the SECI model. Each category describes Ba that is particularly suited to each of the four knowledge conversion modes. *Originating Ba* is the space where individuals share their feelings, emotions, experiences, and mental models. Through dialogue (*Interacting Ba*), individuals' mental models and skills are converted into common terms and concepts, and people jointly engage in the creation of meaning and value. Then, during *Exercising Ba,* modified thoughts and conclusions are implemented and empirically verified. *Cyber Ba* is a space for interactions in a virtual world instead of real space and time; its most important processes include communication and dissemination of information; through the systematization of explicit knowledge (reports, market data), it can become useful for other users. Here combining new explicit knowledge with existing information and knowledge generates and systematizes explicit knowledge throughout an organization.

### *Model developed by Gunnar Hedlund*

In 1994, Gunnar Hedlund from the Stockholm School of Economics and the International Business Academy created a model of knowledge organization that assumed the conversion of tacit and explicit knowledge at four levels: the individual, the small group, the organization, and the inter-organizational domain. The model assumed creation, representation, storage, transfer of application, and protection of organizational knowledge.

**Figure 2.** Types of knowledge and levels of its transfer

| | **AREAS** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Individual** | **Group** | **Organization** | **Inter-organizational domain** |
| **Explicit knowledge** | Knowing calculus | Quality circle's documented analysis of its performance | Organization chart | Supplier's patents and documented practices |
| **Tacit knowledge** | Cross-cultural negotiation skills | Team coordination in complex work | Corporate culture | Customer's attitudes to products and expectations |

Source: own elaboration based on McAdam, McCreedy 1999, pp. 91-101.

Its author emphasized the discrepancy between the knowledge management models implemented in Western Europe/America and Japan (Hedlund, 1994, pp. 73-90). These models are closely related to the organizational culture of enterprises, methods used in HR management, career models, and even organizational structures. These characteristics build an M-form structure or the N-form structure. The M-form structure consists of a hierarchy of branches, within which the decisions made are not strategic because the most important of them are made by a board of directors. This leads to competition rather than cooperation and to the creation of new levels of organizational hierarchy which are conductive to opportunism.

Hedlund (ibid.) argued that the N-form structure is better from the perspective of both individual and organizational goals, which arise in a spontaneous and temporary manner, and are characterized by a parallel level of communication composed of lower-level and middle-level employees. Following his predecessors, Hedlund divided knowledge into tacit and explicit and pointed to its three forms: cognitive, skills, and embedded (as cited in Łapniewska, 2013, p. 6). An unquestionable advantage of this model is the author's emphasis on converting knowledge through dialogue and its assimilation and accommodation processes.

### *Model developed by Gilbert Probst, Steffen Raub and Kai Romhardt*

The model of knowledge organization developed by Probst, Raub, and Romhardt is often referred to as the knowledge management model (Probst, Raub, Romhatd, 1999, pp. 53-56; 2002) and focuses on knowledge as an intellectual resource of an enterprise (see Edvinsson and Malone,

2001, p. 34). This model is based on its authors' observation that managers are primarily interested in an effective use of existing resources rather than in creating new ones or introducing innovative solutions. This approach refers to the resource management approach presented by Hamel and Prahalad (1999, p. 112), in which they argue that companies should base their strategies on key competences.

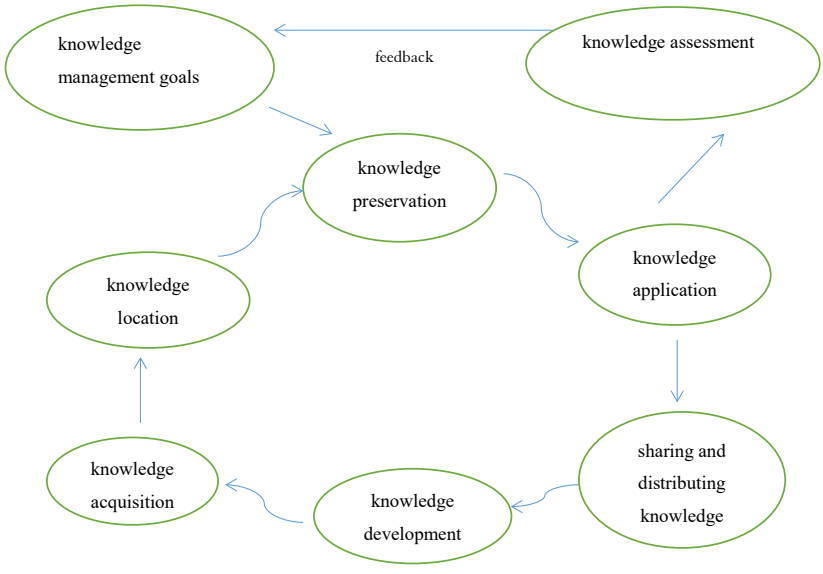
In Probst, Raub, and Romhardt's model, the authors distinguished the following processes:

- Identification and location of sources of knowledge in order to find the sources of knowledge and to develop methods and tools for acquiring this knowledge, for example, through structuring and creating maps of knowledge locations.
- Acquisition of knowledge, which is usually done through interaction with the external environment, customers, suppliers, and external experts.
- Generation of knowledge through research, creating new products, and ensuring employees' development by offering them appropriate trainings and creating conditions for the development of their creativity.
- Distribution of knowledge and its sharing is usually achieved through creating conditions for knowledge sharing and motivating employees to share their knowledge with others and to overcome their resistance to replacing competitive behaviors with those focused on supporting others and taking actions which are beneficial for the entire organization.
- Application of knowledge, which consists in the operationalization of knowledge and the transformation of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge and vice versa; this application facilitates using knowledge in everyday work, allows employees to overcome unreflective behavior patterns and to learn from their mistakes as well as those made by their coworkers; additionally, it triggers inventions and positive motivations for further work.

Preserving knowledge which is located, acquired, and applied makes is possible to select and update it. Protecting knowledge prevents an organization from losing valuable resources, which include, e.g. employees' professional experience, networks of contacts with clients, specific internal procedures, production technology and know-how, IT systems, patents, trademarks, and brands. Knowledge as a resource can be equated with the notion of *intellectual capital*, used by specialists in the area of evaluating intangible assets of an enterprise.

Figure 3 presents the goals of knowledge management and knowledge assessment.

Figure 3. Six processes of knowledge management




Source: own elaboration based on Łapniewska, 2013, p. 5

In order to be able to develop its strategy, an organization needs goals operationalized as specific plans and tasks, organizational culture, and current resources at its disposal. The assessment of these resources boils down to the assessment of the knowledge itself, which can be estimated by measuring the efficiency of its us, by referring to existing models, or by creating new models.

Each of the aforementioned models assumes a particularly significant role of interpersonal relations in the process of knowledge transformation. The dynamics of knowledge, regardless of the assumed model and its elements, are conditioned by positive attitudes of employees and their motivation not only for their development but also for the implementation of an organization's goals as well as their integration. On the other hand, these models indicate the need to include such activities in the company's strategy that motivate employees to share their knowledge with others and to reflect on the company's strategy of knowledge management.

### *The period of employment in the context of employees' functioning in a company – the concept developed by one of the Authors of the paper*

The analysis of the literature and practical experience reveal that four generations (i.e. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z) are currently active on the labor market. Although they work together in the same workplaces, they have different expectations, needs, and motivations, different approached to work, and different levels of commitment to work (Rice, et al., 2022; Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Boniecka, 2022). The fact that age differentiation is often connected with seniority and the level of knowledge sharing (Gaida, 2021) as well as the lack of theoretical concepts addressing this issue, motivated one of the Authors of the paper to develop her own concept, which was subsequently empirically verified.

In this concept, employees are divided into four categories related to the length of their employment in a company. Employees who are starting their professional careers ("the Wolves") are engaged in their work but do not exactly know the procedures binding in their companies[3]. They are ambitious and want to demonstrate their competences and high level of task performance. They want to apply the theoretical and practical knowledge gained at university to perform such tasks that give them a chance to prove themselves. They try to make a good impression on their superiors, clients, and coworkers through their work. Sometimes their involvement does not lead to the planned effects due to fact that they are not adequately familiar with the conditions and tactics that allow them to achieve their goals effectively. In other words, they sometimes act "in a vacuum" or "strike out wildly", wishing to perform their duties well and to build their positive image as a company employee. They are dominated by egocentric motivation, and the goals of the company are important to them only if they are somehow linked with their personal professional goals.

This period lasts up to two years and in practice it boils down to becoming familiar with the company's organizational culture. During this time, "the Wolves" learn about communication channels, formal and informal leaders, procedures, and acceptable patterns of behavior. They establish specific relationships with other employees, who can help them to adapt to the workplace. They are flexible, open to change, ready to take risks to realize their professional ambitions, sometimes without realizing the consequences entailed, including those of a legal nature. These employees want to acquire – in a relatively short time – competences they lack that will

3 This theory was described in detail in A. Krugiełka's article (2019).

allow them to function effectively in the workplace. They look for contacts with people who can and want to share their knowledge with them.

Usually after two years, "Wolves" transform into "the Foxes", i.e. employees with certain seniority in a company, who know its organizational culture and try to become as productive as possible in achieving their company's goals. They have already established specific relations with the management, clients, and coworkers, and they know how to achieve goals related to the tasks performed. Their egocentric motivation is still dominating. Generally, they are not interested in sharing their knowledge with younger colleagues. They are more cautious in their activities, although they are still not able to predict all the possible consequences. In contrast to the previous periods, they try not to waste energy they put in their work but rather to discover procedures (including informal ones) that allow them to raise awareness of their agency.

After the next five years, "Foxes" become "the Owls", i.e. employees who possess in-depth knowledge about their company and its organizational culture, as well as strengths and weaknesses of the existing procedures, which makes them feel safer compared to the previous periods of employment. They possess relatively high competences. More often than "the Wolves" and "the Foxes", they link their professional development with the situation of their company and its level of competitiveness. Also, more frequently than before, they undertake activities which are conductive to realizing their company's interests. Their professional experience allows them to work more effectively for their company than before, and they have relatively well-developed social capital, especially outside the company. They are perceived as valuable employees. The change of the previous egocentric motivation into more allocentric motivation means that they more often and more willingly share their knowledge with younger employees than "the Foxes". They understand the need to introduce amendments and changes, although they are not too eager to do so. Their experience means that the risks they take in the decision-making process have a rational dimension.

After about fifteen years of work, "Owls" change into "the Dinosaurs", i.e. employees with relatively long work experience, who know their company really well, willingly share their knowledge with younger employees, and prefer previously tested communication channels. They are often aware of their high competences, although sometimes their actions and decisions are based on routine, and their analysis of a situation to which they must respond is superficial, although "economic" in terms of the cognitive effort they put into it.

The above division should translate into a specific personnel policy in a company. Employees who begin their employment should be able to

benefit from the experience of both "the Dinosaurs" and "the Owls"; the knowledge of latter could be particularly useful to "the Foxes". Thus, particular attention should be given to the integration of employees of varying seniority, simplification of old or creation of new communication channels, and increasing motivation for knowledge sharing. It can be expected that this division (model), which allows to diagnose employees' "maturity", will contribute to a more effective use of a company's intellectual capital, greater productivity of particular groups of employees, and raising the levels of their job satisfaction.

This concept does not take into consideration a number of determinants which its Author deliberately decided not to include in it; these are e.g. the diversification of generations within particular groups selected on the basis of seniority in a company, the complexity of the process of a product or service preparation, the level of capital intensity of a product or service, and discrepancies in the area of technological development of companies (e.g. in companies from the IT industry, the process of achieving "organizational maturity" by employees is usually shorter than in companies from other industries). The analysis of the level of knowledge sharing depending on seniority is one of the research procedures used to verify this concept.

## Methodology

The study aims to answer the research question: Is there a correlation between employees' level of seniority and their knowledge sharing? Fifty eight Polish managers and entrepreneurs participated in the study, and their assessments referred to the functioning of 272 employees at different stages of seniority from 13 medium-sized commercial, service, trade, and production enterprises. The research tool was one of the scales of the *Questionnaire on the characteristics of employees of varying seniority*[4] regarding knowledge sharing, which comprised five statements[5]. The respondents (managerial staff) assessed employees' knowledge sharing by

4 The structure of the research tool was discussed in detail in a monograph by one of the Authors (Krugiełka, 2019).

5 The statements were as follows:
- Share their knowledge of company procedures
- Whenever necessary, they provide relevant information to coworkers, regardless of their age and seniority
- If they do not have the required information themselves, they make an effort to tell coworkers where to find it
- Share their experience regarding the level of risks connected with decisions made

assigning 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 points to each statement. The reliability of the scale of knowledge sharing (Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient) was 0,73.

## Results

The results of the survey revealed a relatively large variation in the level of knowledge sharing reported by the respondents.

Table 2. The level of knowledge sharing by employees at different stages of seniority

| **Employees at different stages of seniority** | **High level of knowledge sharing (20-25 points)** | | **Medium level of knowledge sharing (14-19 points)** | | **Low level of knowledge sharing (below 14 points)** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| **Wolves (below 2 years, n=64)** | 24 | 37,5 | 28 | 43,75 | 12 | 18,75 |
| **Foxes (between 3 and 7 years, n=73)** | 14 | 19,18 | 12 | 16,44 | 47 | 64,38 |
| **Owls (between 8 and 14 years, n=69)** | 39 | 56,52 | 19 | 27,54 | 11 | 15,94 |
| **Dinosaurs (above 14 years, n=66)** | 31 | 46,97 | 12 | 18,18 | 23 | 34,85 |

Source: own study.

The results reveal the existence of a statistically significant correlation between employees' seniority and the level of their knowledge sharing in the assessment of their superiors by means of a questionnaire. This correlation indicates differences in the level of knowledge sharing by representatives of four groups of employees participating in the study with an exception of the discrepancy between the level of knowledge sharing by "Owls" and "Dinosaurs", which turned out not statistically significant. The verification of the correlation between the level of knowledge sharing between "Wolves" and "Foxes" revealed that "Foxes" share their knowledge to a lesser extent than "Wolves". This correlation was verified using Pearson's chi-square test of independence. The value of the chi-square test

• When they see that coworkers are unable to deal with a task on their own, they offer help without being asked for it.

statistic was chi-square = 8.732, which – when confronted with the critical value (chi-square = 5.991) with df = 2, at the 0.05 significance level – leads to the rejection of the hypothesis stating that the level of knowledge sharing is not correlated with the level of seniority between employees with longer ("Foxes") and shorter ("Wolves") periods of work experience.

The verification of the correlation between the level of knowledge sharing between "Wolves", "Foxes" (whose level of knowledge sharing was the lowest), and "Owls" also showed a statistically significant relation. As before, the Pearson chi-square test of independence was used. The value of the chi-square test statistic was chi square = 16.212, which – when confronted with the critical value (chi-square = 9.487) with df = 4, at the 0.05 significance level – leads to rejecting the hypothesis that the level of knowledge sharing is not correlated with belonging to a group of employees of longer ("Owls" and "Foxes") and shorter ("Wolves") periods of work experience. However, the study did not confirm the correlation between knowledge sharing and seniority in the case of "Owls" and "Dinosaurs".

The analysis of the results obtained in the study clearly demonstrates that the level of knowledge sharing increases with the increase of seniority among employees up to 14 years of employment. However, a period of employment exceeding 14 years is not accompanied by an increase in the level of knowledge sharing. Thus, it seems beneficial to consider the possibility of using this trend in dealing with employees who have no experience in a given organization and in intensifying the integration of employees belonging to different generations.

## Discussion

As the significance of knowledge management in organizations increases, their interest in improving knowledge sharing (including sharing experiences, skills, and knowhow) among their employees also increases (Widen-Wulff, Ginman, 2004; Inkpen, Tsang, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Zhou, Siu, Wang, 2010; Holste, Fields, 2010). However, such improvement is a challenge, primarily due to the unstructured nature of knowledge and numerous obstacles to its smooth flow. Previous studies investigated a range of factors – such as enablers, facilitators, motivators, inhibitors, barriers, and deterrents – which affect knowledge sharing among individuals (Al Alawi, Al Marzooqi, and Mohammed, 2007; Chow, Chan, 2008; Joia, Lemos, 2010; Li, 2010). According to Sharkie (2003), an organization will gain a competitive advantage only if the knowledge it possesses is unique to this organization, and the knowledge possessed by employees translates into their creativity. Also, other authors (Sum Daspit, 2021) who

analyzed family-run businesses emphasized a particular role of trust and knowledge sharing among employees from different generations as a necessary condition for their business survival and growth.

The study described in this article confirms that one of the key factors influencing knowledge sharing in an organization is the seniority of employees, which substantiates the recommendation that managers should take care of positive relations between employees of varying seniority by introducing and rewarding effective knowledge sharing practices. Of course, this is related to building an appropriate organizational culture and a knowledge-based organization, which is by no means an easy task. It requires monitoring the current situation (Rice, et al., 2022), resolving conflict, and taking measures to promote the greatest assets of employees belonging to various categories of seniority within an organization.

The results obtained in the study indicate that the increase in the tendency to share knowledge which accompanies the increase in seniority is not linear, i.e. does not include employees with job experience exceeding 14 years ("the Dinosaurs"). This implies that mangers – as part of their concern for preserving the intellectual capital of an organization – need to pay particular attention to employees with greatest seniority in an organization, by e.g. developing and implementing special programs aimed at integrating employees from highest seniority levels with other employees.

## Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

### *Limitations*

The participants of the study were 58 representatives of Polish managerial staff from 13 medium-sized enterprises who assessed the level of knowledge sharing of 272 employees. A more diverse sample from more than one sector (taking into account small and large enterprises) will probably yield more reliable results. Moreover, a larger sample size will allow performing more thorough data analysis and formulating more detailed conclusions.

### *Future research directions*

Several aspects seem to be promising fields for future research. First of all, as our study has confirmed an increased importance of knowledge sharing in organizations and its correlation with employees' seniority levels, it would be interesting to conduct further studies devoted to knowledge sharing not only among managers but also among employees. Second,

we suggest conducting future studies in the field of knowledge sharing with a view to finding out whether the sharing process varies between organizations, industries, and countries, which could yield fascinating results. Additionally, it seems worth investigating knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer in various hierarchical levels in an organization, as it can reveal the impact of an organization's policies (especially HRM) on them. Other promising areas of investigation might include the impact of national culture on knowledge sharing and transfer as well as their dependence on individual characteristics of knowledge sharers and receivers.

## Conclusions

The results of the study confirm the high "rank" and role played in the development of an organization by experienced employees with the length of employment between 8 and 15 years, which is in line with the findings of other authors (see Fazlagić, 2014, s. 114; Gosseries, 2004; Hersch, Reagan,1999). Generally, these employees are rather willing to share their knowledge with their co-workers. Thus, the study confirmed the correlation between the level of seniority of employees in an organization and their level of knowledge sharing. In addition, the results obtained in the study seem to confirm the validity of the models described in the theoretical part of the article, especially the SECI model and the process of knowledge conversion and its importance for the development of an enterprise.

The above considerations of both a theoretical and empirical nature allow formulating specific recommendations for people responsible for the process of knowledge sharing in a company.

These recommendations include:

- Appropriate arrangement of employees' physical workplaces, following the recommendations of the proxemics of communication, so that employees can establish relationships more easily.
- Limiting the tendency for excessive competition within teams.
- Concern for opportunities to develop informal contacts related to the personalization of tacit knowledge,
- Integration by indicating a common goal for the company.
- Promoting the benefits of knowledge sharing without enforcing it.
- Hiring employees with a value system focused on knowledge sharing.
- Managers' encouragement and support of the culture of knowledge sharing.
- Creating conditions and space for knowledge sharing in an organization/team.

- Encouraging employees to share knowledge and rewarding them for knowledge sharing.
- Formalizing the process of knowledge management in an organization.
- Using the most effective knowledge sharing strategies.

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