

How to Avoid Knowledge Sabotage: A Motivational Model

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Abstract—The purpose of this research is to contribute to knowledge management literature broadening our understanding of knowledge sabotage and designing a motivational framework to limit or avoid sabotage incidents in practice. In our empirical investigation, data collection takes place through online questionnaires and interviews addressed to employees and managers of heterogeneous companies. We expect to identify a negative relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to share knowledge and the phenomenon of knowledge sabotage. In the end, our conclusions will be useful to expand researchers and practitioners' awareness of the most extreme counterproductive workplace behavior that threatens the process of knowledge sharing.

Keywords—*Knowledge Sabotage, Knowledge Sharing, Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has attracted a lot of discussion for several years and it is still one of the most discussed topics in heterogeneous research contexts, including management. Indeed, the relevance of knowledge in organizations has been progressively recognized in the academic and practical fields, up to the identification of theories that highlight it as a fundamental resource [1, 2]. Economic entities have thus learned how to leverage people and organization's knowledge through strategic knowledge management, in order to establish a competitive advantage sustainable over time [3, 4, 5].

Intra-organizational Knowledge Sharing, one of the main knowledge management processes, allows to make individual information or know-how available to others and/or the organization [6, 7]. This process is based on employees' inclination to share acquired or created knowledge with colleagues or superiors; an activity that leads to creating new knowledge from aggregation or its applications in strategic activities [4, 8, 9]. Despite knowledge sharing importance in economic organizations, previous studies testify how certain counterproductive workplace behaviors, such as knowledge

sabotage, can seriously hinder this knowledge management process [10, 11, 34].

Our expectation is to unveil some features related to the sabotage of intra-organizational knowledge, which takes place through an intentional act aimed at harming someone for personal advantage. In particular, it occurs by sharing incorrect information, or concealing them, to the detriment of another organizational member. Knowledge sabotage has been described as the most extreme counterproductive workplace behavior regarding knowledge because of the perpetrator's malicious intentions, as well as its consequences on people and the organization they work for [11,36]. Indeed, it contributes to the formation of a corrupt environment that hinders the knowledge sharing process [12, 13, 14]. Knowledge sabotage occurrences represent a real threat, as a study conducted on 300 individuals showed that almost half of the respondents were victims of this counterproductive workplace behavior [11]. The phenomenon has been identified quite recently and still remains rather unexplored, however. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have been produced to design a motivational model capable of limiting or preventing sabotage incidents.

Starting from this literature gap, we collected employees and managers past experiences in their workplace through a questionnaire and interviews, in order to shed light on this extreme counterproductive behavior. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to outline the traits of a motivational framework qualified to prevent knowledge sabotage incidents, by acting on the propensity to share information with colleagues or superiors. Our work aspires to contribute to knowledge management literature broadening our understanding of knowledge sabotage, as knowledge sharing counterproductive behavior. On the other hand, it offers to practitioners a means of limiting the occurrence of sabotage incidents in practice.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Framing knowledge sharing in economic organizations

According to the knowledge-based theory, knowledge is a fundamental strategic asset that may represent a source of competitive advantage and lead organizations to success, if properly managed [1, 15]. To ensure proper handling of this intangible resource, Knowledge management has arisen as a widespread discipline aimed at supporting its acquisition, transfer, and application in organizations through a knowledge management system [16, 17, 18]. Thus, Knowledge management is framed as a set of practices that enclose knowledge management development and adoption (e.g., knowledge acquisition, storage, manipulation, transfer, sharing, and application) [8, 9].

Among knowledge management processes, knowledge sharing has been highlighted as one of the most important since it promotes knowledge transfer, aggregation, and creation in firms [4, 19]. In particular, intra-organizational knowledge sharing involves the act of making personal knowledge (e.g., know-how, information, data, documents) available to other members of the same organization, in order to take decisions, solve problems, develop new ideas, or implement procedures [6, 7, 20]. Although it is a fundamental process in organizations' knowledge management activities, employees are not always willing to share information with colleagues or superiors [11, 19]. Previous studies have examined some of the so-called counterproductive workplace behaviors and, among those that hinder the process of sharing knowledge, the most extreme is also the most recently discovered harmful behavior: i.e., knowledge sabotage [10, 12, 13].

B. Knowledge Sabotage: what is it about?

Knowledge sabotage refers to the perpetration of sabotage activities in the workplace [11, 36]. It is configured as a counterproductive behavior related to knowledge, aimed at damaging colleagues or the organization they work for [13, 21]. As a rule, the saboteur acts intentionally, being consciously in possession of important information for the target, who is supposed to be able to successfully apply the knowledge in work-related tasks [11]. Knowledge sabotage has been highlighted as the most extreme counterproductive workplace behavior regarding knowledge because of its malicious motive that leads the saboteur to intentionally commit workplace sabotage for his/her personal advantage [11, 12, 21]. Furthermore, the negative consequences of sabotage incidents affect both people and organizations, corrupting the working environment and the mutual sharing of resources [13, 36]. Saboteur's behavior is typically considered active, when he/she provides wrong knowledge to the target, and passive, when he/she conceals knowledge from the same. Moreover, sabotage incidents may be unprovoked or provoked by a request of the target [13, 21]. In any case, saboteurs

deliberately interfere with the natural circulation of information and know-how to achieve their malicious goals.

Drawing on previous research, the reasons for having a sabotage attitude can be identified in some main motives, which result in damaging the target for personal advantage [12, 13, 36]. First, this phenomenon is related to gratification divers when the saboteur wants to obtain a career advancement or personal benefits. Then, sabotage may occur as a consequence of existing conflicts between the parties or, at worst, because of the malevolent personality of the perpetrator. Overall, the reason behind this counterproductive behavior can be interpreted through the lens of the Agency Theory, which suggests the divergence of interest between the two parties [36, 37, 38].

Since it is possible to stimulate knowledge circulation and sharing thanks to motivational strategies, a properly designed motivational system to share knowledge may be able to prevent or limit sabotage incidents. Indeed, it aims to affect individuals' decisions and overcome different interests between employees, by accentuating the benefits of sharing instead of sabotage [14, 36, 39, 40]. Therefore, a concise presentation of the studies that support as intrinsic and extrinsic motivations can positively affect the sharing of knowledge is carried out below, in order to develop some new hypotheses about knowledge sabotage occurrences consistent with the knowledge management literature.

C. The motivation to share knowledge

Motivational practices are classified into two categories with respect to the origin of behavioral influence: i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic [22]. Concerning people's motivation to share critical information with colleagues, it has been identified that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations foster knowledge sharing behaviors [23-26, 40]. Drawing on previous studies, these relationships are properly detailed and justified below.

In the knowledge sharing context, intrinsic motivation has been shown to be an interesting means for encouraging people to initiate or intensify the flow of information to other members [25, 26, 27]. Previous investigations deepened the two components of the internal sphere of motivation, by arguing that both self-efficacy and enjoyment to help others are positively correlated to the intention to share knowledge. Knowledge self-efficacy is related to empowering of employees since they tend to approach sharing behavior because of their condition of freedom, independence, and autonomy in their activities [25, 28, 29]. On the other hand, the perceived self-enjoyment is a behavior attributable to the desire to help others without expecting anything in return and, as such, it has been shown to be a type of motivation within the person able to push to share knowledge [26, 30, 31].

Contrary to the previous ones, employees' extrinsic motivation to share knowledge is based on behaviors that arise from a cost-benefit analysis [22]. In other words, people are

expected to share information and know-how with colleagues when individual perceived benefits outweigh costs deriving from the knowledge exchange [27, 32]. Past studies highlighted as extrinsic motivations have an inconsistent effect on knowledge sharing. Indeed, it demonstrates a positive [28], irrelevant [25, 27], and even negative [33] impact on knowledge sharing. However, from a meta-analysis elaborated by [26], “the overall impact across the studies is positive” so, to the best of our knowledge, we can assume extrinsic motivations have a positive impact on knowledge sharing intentions.

As seen for the intrinsic motivations, two main perceived benefits have been identified also with regard to extrinsic motivations: i.e., organizational rewards and reciprocal benefits [22]. On the one hand, organizational rewards are based on a pay-per-performance system which is supposed to increase individual benefits derived from knowledge sharing behaviors. Incentives can include monetary rewards, such as bonuses and salary increases, or non-monetary rewards, such as promotion and job security [25, 22]. On the other hand, reciprocity behaviors arise from the benefit of some individuals who contribute to a social exchange system. Thus, reciprocal knowledge exchange relationships foster employees sharing behaviors in organizations and increase knowledge flow [23, 26, 31].

III. HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT: A MOTIVATIONAL FRAMEWORK AGAINST SABOTAGE

Building on prior studies, we argue that the positive effect of internal and external motivations towards the sharing of knowledge contributes to reducing the occurrences of counterproductive behaviors, such as knowledge sabotage [25, 26, 36]. As workplace sabotage involving knowledge arises from negative emotions and diverging interest between employees and/or managers [11], it may be possible to reduce the occurrences of this harmful practice by aligning people interests thanks to motivational incentives [13, 21, 40, 41]. Therefore, we advance a conceptually new motivational framework based on the negative relation between knowledge sabotage and employees’ motivation to share. In this sense, if a properly designed motivational framework can improve knowledge flow in organizations, we believe it is demanded to study in deep the effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to share on this extreme counterproductive behavior.

By abstracting the intrinsic motivation of the individual, we believe that strengthening employees’ confidence in their capacity to supply useful knowledge to the organization, in the condition of autonomy and independence (i.e., self-efficacy) [25, 26], not only leads to an intensification of knowledge flow but even prevents the occurrence of sabotage incidents. Likewise, encouraging altruism so that colleagues are pleased to help and support each other without necessarily expecting anything in return (i.e., self-enjoyment) [27, 28], can potentially reduce the negative feeling that leads people to

practice knowledge sabotage [36, 40, 41]. Accordingly, from a preliminary analysis we can assume that there is an inverse relationship between the forms of intrinsic motivation and knowledge sabotage, whereby motivated employees are less likely to commit sabotage occurrences involving knowledge. Therefore, we developed the following hypotheses.

H1: Intrinsic motivations to share knowledge are negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

H1.1: Knowledge self-efficacy is negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

H1.2: Knowledge self-enjoyment is negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

Drawing on the pointed out empirical research, we can reasonably advance the negative relation between extrinsic motivation to share knowledge and knowledge sabotage occurrence, as well [13, 26, 36, 40]. Although it is a debated topic [26, 27, 41], rewards intended to stimulate the sharing of knowledge in organizations seem to be a valid incentive to deter saboteurs from concealing key information, or deliberately sharing wrong knowledge, towards colleagues [25, 26, 28, 36]. Similarly, a reciprocal knowledge exchange relationship not only encourages knowledge sharing behavior, it can also make individuals less inclined to commit sabotage incidents promoting a system of mutual exchange of information [26, 31, 39, 40]. Thus, both extrinsic motivations to share knowledge (i.e., organizational rewards and reciprocal benefits) may contribute to increasing benefits of sharing in employees’ cost-benefit analysis [22, 38]. Accordingly, we put forward the following hypotheses.

H2: Extrinsic motivations to share knowledge are negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

H2.1: Organizational rewards are negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

H2.2: Reciprocal benefits are negatively related to knowledge sabotage attitudes.

Considering previous studies on people motivation to share knowledge in the workplace [25, 26, 27, 33, 41], we can expect the relationship between knowledge sabotage and intrinsic motivations to be more relevant than that with extrinsic ones. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

H3: Intrinsic motivation to share knowledge (i.e., self-efficacy and enjoyment in helping others) has a stronger effect in preventing knowledge sabotage attitudes than extrinsic motivation to share knowledge (i.e., tangible reward and reciprocity).

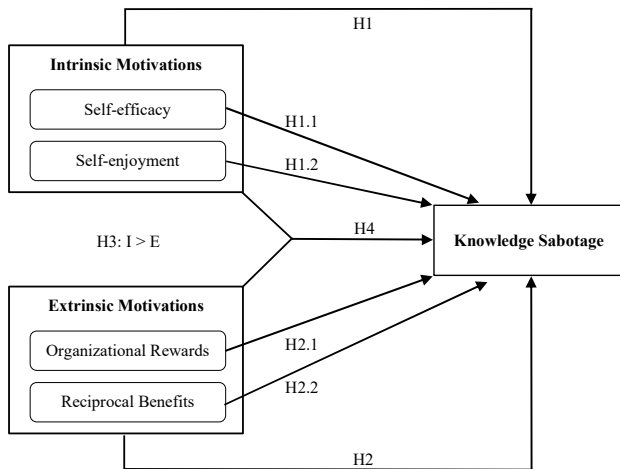
Finally, consistently with the previous hypotheses, we believe that the conjunct effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to share knowledge may be even more relevant in preventing sabotage occurrences. Indeed, even though

extrinsic motivations have been shown to be less reliable than intrinsic ones in fostering knowledge flow, it has been disclosed that they can likewise foster knowledge flow in organizations [26, 28, 29, 36, 41]. In this sense, a comprehensive motivation framework should prove more effective in preventing sabotage occurrences than the self-standing adoption of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations. The following hypothesis is thus formulated.

H4: The conjunct effect of intrinsic motivation (self-efficacy and enjoyment in helping others) and extrinsic motivation (tangible reward and reciprocity) to share knowledge is stronger than single effects in preventing knowledge sabotage attitudes.

Fig. 1 represents the negative relationships among the variables identified in hypotheses.

Fig. 1. The motivational framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

IV. METHODOLOGY AND EXPECTED RESULTS

An empirical study has been conducted through an online questionnaire, addressed to managers and employees of Italian companies, differing in industry and size, with a minimum of 50 employees in each one. We intend to collect at least 200 valid answers from the survey to build a reliable basis for our study. All items were adapted based on previous studies of [25] and [14]. Then, it is our intention to conduct some interviews with participants to provide meta inferences and deeper explanation of our hypotheses' testing. As the topic is relatively new, the integration of a qualitative investigation to the online survey can help explain and support the quantitative findings [42].

Regarding the expected results, first of all, in our research we expect about half of the respondents to have committed or been victims of any knowledge sabotage forms. This would confirm the previous investigations (e.g., [11]) and would propose again the relevance of the phenomenon. Then, the hypotheses put forward are tested using an OLS regression

analysis (as for a similar framework used by [35]), to uncover the extent of the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and knowledge sabotage in organizations. We expect to identify an inverse relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to share knowledge and the phenomenon of knowledge sabotage. In particular, the first type of motivation could prevail over the second, but a joint motivational approach to people working in an organization should most effectively discourage this counterproductive workplace behavior. Consequently, we expect to integrate the survey's results with the interviews to confirm what has been proposed above and to strengthen its significance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research aims to shed light on a literary segment of knowledge management that still remains obscured. It wants to expand researchers and practitioners' comprehension of the most extreme and treacherous counterproductive workplace behaviors that threaten the regular process of intra-organizational knowledge sharing. From the empirical analysis, it is expected to confirm the diffusion and relevance of the phenomenon of knowledge sabotage, to then study in depth how a motivational system can impact it. Indeed, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to share knowledge should be useful practices to deal with sabotage occurrences in organizations. Our ultimate goal is, therefore, to advance and empirically validate a motivational model that acts as a guide to researchers and practitioners to better understand the dynamics of knowledge sabotage and to unveil how to deal with it in practice.

Our work contributes to the knowledge management literature in several ways by: a) supplementing the literature on knowledge sharing counterproductive workplace behaviors, b) outlining a more detailed profile of the phenomenon of knowledge sabotage, c) confirming the prevalence and significance of sabotage incidents in organizations, and d) advancing a new empirically tested motivational model that demonstrates how to avoid or limit situations of knowledge sabotage. As for its managerial implications, our study will offer a comprehensive source of information to expand practitioners' awareness of knowledge sabotage in economic realities. Moreover, the result of our investigations will contribute to obtaining a practical tool that indicates to managers how to adequately motivate people to avoid sabotage incidents.

In conclusion, given the considerable importance of knowledge in organizations, this research aims to deepen our awareness of a phenomenon that threatens the regular development of knowledge sharing processes.

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