



Examination of the relationship between competitive work environment and employees' openness to knowledge sharing

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of a competitive work environment on openness to knowledge sharing. A conceptual model, drawing on the existing literature, is developed to analyze how a competitive work environment contributes to openness to sharing knowledge among employees in organizations. The conceptual model includes coworker desire to learn as a mediating variable and incentives to knowledge sharing and job security as moderating variables. Data collected from eight banks with a total of 237 employees is used to test the research hypotheses using structural equation modeling techniques. The results show that coworker desire to learn mediates the relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing, and both incentives to knowledge sharing and job security moderate the effect of a competitive work environment on openness to knowledge sharing. The study makes theoretical and practical contributions to knowledge management by showing the mechanism through which a competitive work environment contributes to openness to sharing knowledge in organizations.

Keywords: Competitive workplace; desire to learn; job security; knowledge sharing.

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1. Introduction

Beginning in the 20th century, which has been referred to as the century of the exponential growth of knowledge, the nature of global competitiveness became more dependent on the knowledge and skills of the workforce. As such, investing in capitalizing knowledge and harnessing skills has played a pivotal role in the sustainable development of many institutions and organizations (Bilginoğlu, 2019; Syed et al., 2024). This accumulation of knowledge is useful when shared with employees and other relevant stakeholders and can add value to an organization. Acknowledging this, researchers have emphasized the importance of creating knowledge-sharing systems (Razmerita et al., 2016). Managers now see that the creation, application, and sharing of knowledge are vital to maintaining a competitive advantage (Stojanović-Aleksić et al., 2019; Huang & Pham 2023).

A key aspect of the knowledge management process relies on disseminating knowledge and making it both accessible and usable for individuals and organizational units (Paulin & Suneson, 2015). Knowledge sharing is a complex process that entails providing both explicit and tacit knowledge to others to aid with goal achievement, problem-solving, idea development, and implementation of policies and procedures (Wang & Noe 2010; Chen et al., 2021). Therefore, deliberate actions are required to encourage the transfer of knowledge from one person to another within an organization. Management can certainly create systems to facilitate knowledge sharing by employees and design incentives to promote this practice, but ultimately, knowledge holders decide voluntarily to share the knowledge that resides within their minds (Empson, 2001). The key to knowledge sharing is people's willingness to share their knowledge when an organization needs it (Zyngier & Nagpal, 2015). However, many unexplored problems of knowledge sharing draw our attention to further research. For example, competitiveness among employees in the workplace nowadays has increased the workload on employees. Consistent with this statement, research has shown people's inability to cope with increasing job demands encourages individuals to hide their knowledge from other employees (Jahanzeb et al., 2020). Organizations characterized by a competitive culture are more likely to be highly achievement-oriented. In such a competitive environment, employees subconsciously cling to their knowledge for their gain and use and refrain from sharing to benefit others (Connelly et al., 2012).

Although research on knowledge management has increased considerably over the last few years, there is still an extended scope to explore in the context of sharing. The body of research shows that limited literature has examined the effect of knowledge sharing in the competitive work setting. Today, the increased focus on knowledge in the competitive world requires deep research into the literature on knowledge management behavior (Hernaus et al., 2019; Morshedi et al., 2023). Our research reveals that, in the field of knowledge management, very few studies have investigated the effects of competitive work environments on knowledge sharing. Consequently, this study broadens our understanding of the relationship between workplace competition and knowledge-sharing behavior.

Other important factors that have not been considered in past literature relate to organizational factors such as job security, incentives, and rewards (Mohammad et al., 2016). Even though previous works have shown that high-commitment HR practices, including employment practices, comprehensive training, and development, enhance individual knowledge-sharing behavior, other practices such as job security and the role of incentives have yet to be investigated (Mohammad et al., 2016). We contend that the provision of job security, incentives, and rewards are likely to promote knowledge-sharing behavior in an organization because these factors indicate management support toward personal career growth and development. This argument is consistent with the social relations theory.

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According to Boer et al., (2002), people weigh benefits and costs before determining whether to continue a relationship or exchange with others. In other words, relationships or exchanges are built on the norm of reciprocity (Boer et al., 2002), where people should return the benefits given to them in a relationship. In the employment context, when employees feel that management has provided them with the necessary support, the former is more inclined to reciprocate and show good behavior through knowledge sharing. Therefore, when employees feel the security of continuing their jobs in a non-threatening environment, they start to develop a willingness to share their job-related knowledge (Mehrizi, 2016).

According to organizational theory, an employee's willingness to share knowledge in a competitive work environment resides in their ability to earn and reward merits over others (Garcia & Gluesing, 2013). Given the gap in the existing literature and in response to recommendations made by Wang and Noe (2010), who suggest more research should be conducted in examining the organizational practices affecting knowledge sharing, we attempt to investigate the role of job security and incentives in knowledge-sharing behavior.

This paper also investigates how an employee's desire to learn affects knowledge sharing. According to social psychological theory, when employees believe knowledge sharing and openness to learn help them better understand their work and perform their jobs more efficiently, their desire to learn and share new knowledge increases (Chen & Cheng, 2012). When the workplace environment is competitive, individuals become even more goal-oriented to secure rewards and benefits, which can lead to a heightened willingness to learn and share knowledge (Sajeva, 2014).

1.1. Purpose of study

In this study, the researchers argue that a competitive work environment positively influences employees' desire to learn, which in turn positively influences co-workers' willingness to share information. These two relationships are also moderated by job security and incentives to share knowledge, respectively. Although the knowledge-sharing literature is multifaceted and has advanced over the past years, it still lacks adequate empirical evidence of the influence of the desire to learn on knowledge-sharing. This study provides a much-needed empirical examination of the influence of the desire to learn on knowledge-sharing behavior.

This study also contributes to the literature on knowledge sharing in a different cultural context. The majority of research on knowledge sharing has been done mostly in the West (Cabrera et al., 2006); studies in Eastern nations including China (Ardichvili 2002), Malaysia, and South Korea (Bock et al., 2005) are becoming more prevalent; but studies in the Middle Eastern region remain scarce.

To meet our research objective, the rest of this paper is structured as follows. This study first discusses the relevant literature on knowledge sharing, leading to the development of the research hypotheses. Second, we proceed by presenting the research methodology, followed by data analysis. Results of the analyses are presented next, followed by a discussion of the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results and their implications, a presentation of the study's limitations, and perspectives for further research.

1.2. Research hypotheses

Here are the various hypothetical relationships that we aim to test in this empirical research.

Hypothesis 1. A competitive work environment is positively related to a coworker's desire to learn.

Hypothesis 2. Employees' desire to learn is positively related to openness to knowledge sharing.

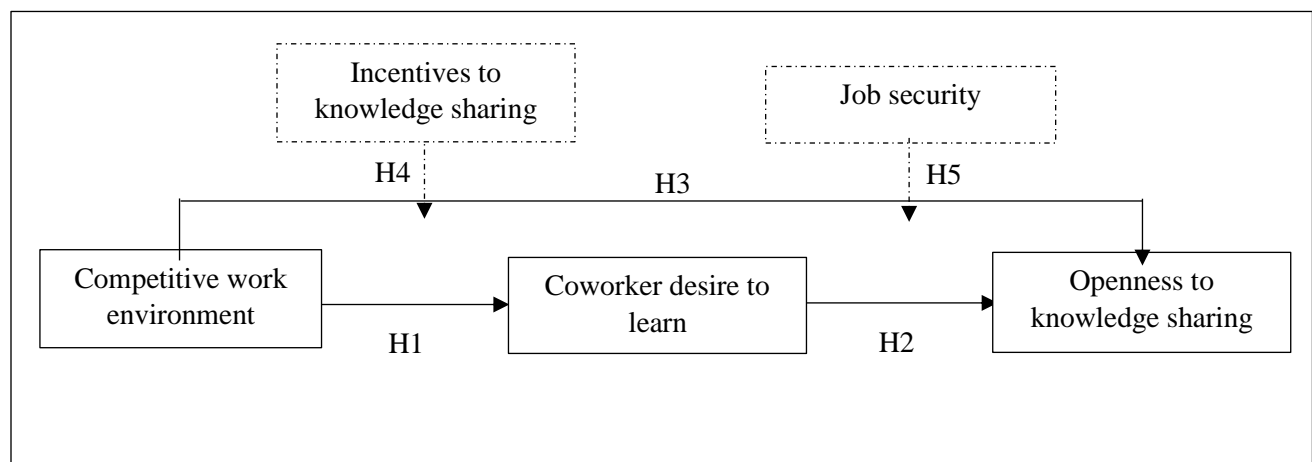
Hypothesis 3. A competitive work environment is negatively related to openness to knowledge sharing.

Hypothesis 4. The relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing is moderated by incentives to knowledge sharing, and the relationship becomes positive when incentives to knowledge sharing are high.

Hypothesis 5. The relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing is moderated by job security, such that the relationship becomes positive when job security is high.

Figure 1 presents the hypothetical relationships.

Figure 1
Conceptual model



2. Methods and materials

2.1. Participants

This research was conducted in Kuwait, a country in the Middle East. Top banks in the country were invited to participate in this study regarding the knowledge-sharing behavior of employees. The sample size was derived from eight banks, which represented both the private and public sectors. In total, 710 bank employees participated in the study, and 237 participants completed the surveys for a response rate of about 33%. Twelve responses were removed from the sample size as they were incomplete.

2.2. Data collection instrument

The survey questions were first drafted in English and then translated into Arabic using a professional translation service. The participants were given the choice of completing an online or paper-based version of the survey. It should be noted that the survey was available in both Arabic and English. The online version of the survey was created using Key Survey. Participants were sent two links with the Arabic and English versions of the survey via official email through their bank managers. Participants also received the paper-based version in both Arabic and English in a sealed envelope with instructions to fill in the answers in the language they were most comfortable with and then share the sealed envelope with bank management.

2.3. Ethics

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Throughout the whole study, the confidentiality of the participant's data was scrupulously upheld. All obtained sensitive or personal data was anonymized and kept in a secure location to avoid unwanted access. For analysis and reporting, only aggregated data was utilized, protecting each participant's identity.

3. Results

3.1. Measurement model analysis

Before testing the structural hypotheses (see Figure 1), we performed several analyses to check the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. The results of the measurement model analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Ouakouak, M.L., Al-Buloushi, N., Ouedraogo, N. & Hewapathirana, G. (2024). Examination of the relationship between competitive work environment and employees' openness to knowledge sharing. *Global Journal of Business, Economics, and Management: Current Issues*. 14(1), 28-38. <https://doi.org/10.18844/gjbem.v14i1.9370>

Constructs and items	Standardized factor loadings
Competitive Work Environment (CWE)	
$\alpha = 0.866$ CR = 0.902 AVE = 0.648 KMO = 0.828	
CWE1 – My coworkers and I are compensated (e.g., pay, bonuses) based on our performance relative to others.	.765
CWE2 - The amount of freedom and personal discretion I get is based on performing better than my coworkers	.779
CWE3 - I am acknowledged for my accomplishments only when I outperform my coworkers.	.720
CWE4 - My status at work depends on my performance relative to others.	.779
CWE5 - My coworkers are very competitive individuals.	.712
Coworker Desire to Learn (CDL)	
$\alpha = 0.926$ CR = 0.945 AVE = 0.774 KMO = 0.872	
CDL1 – enjoy working on tasks that force them to learn new things.	.837
CDL2 - often looks for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.	.854
CDL3 - value the opportunity to extend the range of their abilities.	.860
CDL4 - enjoy testing different approaches when they have difficulty solving a problem.	.817
CDL5 - express a strong desire to acquire new knowledge and skills.	.870
Openness to Knowledge Sharing (OKS)	
$\alpha = 0.919$ CR = 0.940 AVE = 0.757 KMO = 0.852	
OKS1 – If I have some special knowledge or technique on how to perform a task, I am likely to tell others about it.	.817
OKS2 - I usually exchange information, and knowledge, and share skills with my coworkers.	.845
OKS3 - I freely provide other members with hard-to-find knowledge or specialized skills.	.845
OKS4 - I voluntarily help others to develop relevant strategies and techniques to perform their work.	.848
OKS5 - I share a lot of useful work-related information and ideas with others.	.818
Incentives to Knowledge Sharing (IKS)	
$\alpha = 0.914$ CR = 0.936 AVE = 0.744 KMO = 0.846	
IKS1 – I see benefits from exchanging ideas with my colleagues.	.825
IKS2 - I believe that by exchanging ideas we can move new projects or initiatives forward more quickly than by working alone	.847
IKS3 - I feel that I have also learned from my co-workers by exchanging knowledge and skills.	.827
IKS4 - My work responsibility includes sharing knowledge and skills with others.	.808
IKS5 - Sharing knowledge and skills is well-valued in my organization.	.820
Job Security (JS)	
$\alpha = 0.917$ CR = 0.938 AVE = 0.753 KMO = 0.821	
JS1 - I am currently safe from dismissal at this organization	.851
JS2 - I am not worried about my future with this organization	.952
JS3 - I am not worried about my job security	.909
JS4 - In my organization, those who share their knowledge don't fear being replaced and losing their jobs	.656
JS5 - In my organization, it is safe to share knowledge and skills from a job security perspective	.704

3.2. Structural model analysis

The test of the hypotheses was performed using the structural equation modeling in AMOS 24.0. We ran a first model to test the direct causal relationships as shown in Figure 1. The model fit was evaluated using the ratio of the chi-square to the degrees of freedom (Chi2/df), goodness of fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit index (IFI), Tucker–Lewis's index (TLI), and root mean square

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of approximation (RMSEA), as recommended by several authors (Gefen et al., 2000). The model fit seemed to meet the statistical requirements ($\chi^2/df = 2.133$, GFI = 0.908; CFI = 0.962, IFI = 0.962; TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.069), indicating a good model fit with the data.

As depicted in Table 3, the results of direct hypotheses testing showed that Hypothesis 1, suggesting a positive relationship between competitive work environment and coworker desire to learn, was accepted ($\beta = 0.463$, $p = 0.000$). Furthermore, coworkers' desire to learn had a significant impact on openness to knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.436$, $p = 0.000$), supporting Hypothesis 2. In contradiction to our suggestion, the results revealed that a competitive work environment does not have a significant direct effect on openness to knowledge sharing ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.184$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was rejected.

Table 3

Result of direct structural relationships

Hypothesis	Path Specified	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Comments
Hypothesis 1	Competitive work environment → Coworkers desire to learn	0.463***	0.000	Accepted
Hypothesis 2	Coworkers desire to learn → Openness to knowledge sharing	0.436***	0.000	Accepted
Hypothesis 3	Competitive work environment → Openness to knowledge sharing	0.102 (ns)	0.184	Rejected

Notes: *** $p < 0.001$ ns: non-significant

We then examined the mediating effect of coworker desire to learn on the relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing. In so doing, we employed the bootstrapping technique. We run the same first model using the bootstrapping technique in AMOS. SEM results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of mediating effect

Path	Indirect effect	Direct effect	Total effect
Competitive work environment → Coworkers desire to learn	–	0.463**	0.463**
Coworkers desire to learn → Openness to knowledge sharing	–	0.436**	0.436**
Competitive work environment → Openness to knowledge sharing	0.202***	0.102 (ns)	0.304**

Notes: ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$ ns = non-significant

As shown in Table 4, the indirect effect of the competitive work environment on openness to knowledge sharing was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.202$, $p = 0.000$), supporting the mediation effect of coworker desire to learn on the relationship between the competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing. Because the direct effect of the work environment on openness to knowledge sharing was not significant ($\beta = 0.102$, $p = 0.208$), there was a full mediation.

Finally, we performed multigroup analyses to test the moderation effects of two intervening variables (incentives to knowledge sharing and job security) on the relationship between competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing. First, we ran a multigroup analysis to test the moderation effect of *incentives for knowledge sharing*. We divided the data sample into two groups using the median (3.60) of *incentives to knowledge sharing*, obtaining the following: group 1 with low incentives

(127 responses) and group 2 with high incentives (110 responses). The model fit seemed to meet the statistical requirements ($\chi^2/df = 2.133$, GFI = 0.908; CFI = 0.962, NFI = 0.931; TLI = 0.952, RMSEA = 0.069), indicating a good model fit with the data. The estimation of the multigroup analysis produced the following statistical values, indicating a good model fit with data: $\chi^2/df = 1.698$, GFI = 0.864; CFI = 0.941, IFI = 0.942; TLI = 0.926, RMSEA = 0.054. As depicted in Table 5, the results of the multigroup analysis revealed that the relationship between competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing was insignificant ($\beta = -0.015$, $p = 0.886$) with a low degree of incentives (group 1) and significant ($\beta = 0.540$, $p = 0.023$) with high a degree of incentives (group 2). Therefore, incentives for knowledge sharing play a moderation role in the relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing, thereby supporting Hypothesis 4.

Second, we ran another multigroup analysis to test the moderation effect of *job security*. We split the data sample into two groups using the median (3.80) of *job security*. We obtained the following groups: group 1 with low job security (119 responses) and group 2 with high job security (118 responses). The multigroup analysis demonstrated good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.604$, GFI = 0.871; CFI = 0.953, IFI = 0.954; TLI = 0.942, RMSEA = 0.051). Multigroup analysis results indicate that the relationship between competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing was insignificant in both groups ($\beta = 0.035$, $p = 0.726$ and $\beta = -0.028$, $p = 0.817$, respectively). Thus, job security is not a moderator of the relationship between a competitive work environment and openness to knowledge sharing, rejecting Hypothesis 5. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Results of multi-group analyses

Path Specified	Moderator	Group	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Comments
Competitive work environment → Openness to knowledge sharing	<i>Incentives to knowledge sharing</i> (H4)	Low	-0.015 (ns)	0.886	Accepted
		High	0.540*	0.023	
	Job security (H5)	Low	0.035 (ns)	0.726	Rejected
		High	-0.028 (ns)	0.817	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$ ns: not significant

4. Discussion

In this paper, the researchers investigate the direct effect of a competitive work environment on coworkers' openness to knowledge sharing and its indirect effect on coworkers' desire to learn. We also study the moderating effect of incentives and job security in the relationship between a competitive work environment and coworkers' openness to knowledge sharing.

The study found a competitive work environment has a positive effect on employees' desire to learn, which in turn has a positive effect on coworkers' openness to knowledge sharing. Contrary to our hypotheses, we failed to find a direct significant effect of a competitive work environment on coworkers' openness to knowledge sharing. This relationship also remains insignificant in the presence or absence of high job security but positively significant in the presence of high incentives for knowledge sharing. This study contributes to the theory and practice in several ways.

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This study has limitations, despite its theoretical and practical contributions. First, when assessing the results, it is important to keep in mind that data was collected from employees of Kuwaiti banks. The results are country and industry-specific and would not easily apply to other contexts. Future studies would benefit from focusing on additional industries to broaden the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, this study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Cross-sectional research may not always capture changes in knowledge-sharing behavior over time, even though the results are instructive. Therefore, it would be useful for future research to examine the changes in terms of type, quality, and amount of knowledge exchanged over time.

This study found that the knowledge receiver's desire to learn positively influences the knowledge provider's willingness to share knowledge. However, there are different forms of knowledge, including tacit (know-how) and explicit (know-what). Knowledge can also be low or high in importance. It would be important to know what type of knowledge one is willing to share in the context of a coworker expressing a desire to learn. This study suspects that the declaration of a desire to learn would be met with the sharing of tacit knowledge through the development of a mentoring and coaching relationship that would take place between the two parties. The extent to which the knowledge provider would share knowledge with the knowledge receiver would likely depend on the quality of the relationship between the two (Manzoor & Zhang 2024). Further research is needed to uncover the dynamics of knowledge sharing once the knowledge receiver expresses a desire to learn.

This study found that a competitive work environment has a positive indirect effect on the knowledge provider's openness to share knowledge through the knowledge receiver's desire to learn. Nonetheless, it is possible that, regardless of an employee's desire to learn, if the workplace is very competitive with a zero-sum game culture, there will not be an openness to share knowledge. Future research should investigate how a competitive work environment reaches a point where it no longer, directly or indirectly, promotes knowledge sharing and, to the contrary, leads to knowledge hoarding.

5. Conclusion

A competitive work environment does not necessarily mean that employees are in direct competition with other coworkers. Someone may belong to a group, unit, or department that does not experience inner competition but is in competition with other groups, units, or departments. In such a situation, a competitive work environment can result in the development of a group identity and intensify knowledge sharing within while possibly inhibiting knowledge spillover to other units. Similarly, it may be that one's job is interdependent with another's. Therefore, an overall competitive work environment would likely lead to more cooperation and knowledge sharing between people involved in the same interdependent work process because the knowledge and ultimately the performance of the knowledge receiver benefits the knowledge provider. Future qualitative research to uncover the intricacies of knowledge sharing in different competitive workplace settings is warranted.

Research on knowledge sharing will keep expanding, demonstrating the importance of knowledge as a resource for organizations in developing competitive advantage. Even though our research was able to close gaps in the literature, more studies in this field are still required. First, we advise that this study be repeated in various settings such as in other countries in the region. Such research will assist us in developing useful theories of knowledge sharing. Second, the variance that has been addressed presents an opportunity to investigate additional variables that affect knowledge sharing. Finally, because knowledge sharing does not occur in a vacuum but is conditioned by a variety of factors, it is necessary to examine the possible factors that might further encourage or prevent it.

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