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## PERSONALITY AS A PREDICTOR OF KNOWLEDGE-HIDING BEHAVIOUR: CASE STUDY OF ALPHA ELECTRONICS

SADEEQA R. KHAN<sup>1</sup> AND MUHAMMAD USMAN<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours can be detrimental to employees' interpersonal relationships and to individual and organisational learning and creativity. However, not everyone who hides knowledge hides it the same way; as individuals are different, so are their behaviours. This study explores the links between employees' personality traits and their knowledge-hiding behaviours. By using a single case study as a research methodology and collecting data through 28 semi-structured interviews, we foreground the patterns of relationships between employees' personality traits and knowledge-hiding behaviours, which are: rationalised hiding, evasive hiding and playing dumb. Our findings suggest that extroverts involve in evasive knowledge hiding; while introverts demonstrate rationalised hiding. Moreover, both extrovert and introvert employees engage in playing dumb in situations that involve risk for their jobs and careers. Besides theoretical contributions, the study offers important implications for organisations faced with the challenges of shortage of skills and knowledge.

**Keywords:** Knowledge hiding, Personality, Rationalised hiding, Playing dumb, Evasive hiding.

### INTRODUCTION

Employees' knowledge-hiding behaviour (a deliberate effort to conceal or withhold knowledge that others have asked for (Connelly and Zweig, 2015)) can be detrimental for an organisation in several ways. Knowledge-hiding behaviours can lead to delays in decision-making, create a culture of distrust, harm employees' interpersonal relationships and impede knowledge sharing, organisational learning and innovation (Connelly et al., 2012; Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Ford and Staples, 2010). Connelly et al. (2012) suggest that employees can demonstrate three types of knowledge-hiding behaviours: rationalised hiding, evasive hiding and playing dumb. Rationalised hiding refers to knowledge-hiding behaviour where the hider gives a justification for why knowledge is not forthcoming by either suggesting that (s)he is unable to provide the requested knowledge or putting blame on someone else. Evasive hiding refers to knowledge-hiding behaviour where the hider provides incorrect or incomplete information or a false promise of providing information in the future. Playing dumb refers to knowledge-hiding behaviour where the hider pretends not to have the requested knowledge.

Globalisation and advancement in information technology have blurred the boundaries of jobs, organisations and nations. The changing nature of the workplace and work and increasing interdependence requires more focus on teamwork and close collaboration among employees. However, team members' knowledge-hiding behaviour can harm the relational dynamics and performance of the team (Peng, 2013) and hamper managers' endeavours to achieve organisational objectives and gain competitive advantage (Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Ford and Staples, 2010). Knowledge hiding can worsen the situation for firms from emerging economies, as due to economic and trade reforms of varying magnitude, emerging economies have witnessed an influx of multinational

<sup>1</sup> Sadeeqa R. Khan, Assistant Professor, University of the Punjab, Pakistan. sadeeqa@pucit.edu.pk.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Usman, PhD, Assistant Professor, Comsats University, Pakistan. hmusman10@yahoo.com.

companies from developed countries (MNCs henceforth), but there is an obvious gap of skills, resources, technology, knowledge and capabilities between the developed countries' MNCs and the emerging economy firms (Wright et al., 2005; Pérez-Nordtvedt, Babakus and Kedia, 2010; Chittoor, Aulakh and Ray, 2015). Consequently, the emerging economy firms face serious challenges in competing with the MNCs and responding to competitive pressure (Zou and Cavusgil, 2002). Employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours can impede the pace of learning and can further deteriorate firms' ability to respond to the competitive pressure.

However, not everyone who hides knowledge hides it the same way; as individuals are different, so are their behaviours. The quest for exploring the dynamics of individual differences is centuries old and can be traced back to the Greek Philosophers in the fourth century BC (Wright, 1983). Personality psychology is one of the ways to study individual differences. Personality has been defined in a variety of ways: Wright et al. (1970, p. 511) defined personality as "the relatively stable and enduring aspects of individuals which distinguish them from other people and form the basis of our predictions concerning their future behaviour". Therefore, we argue that depending on the personality traits, different individuals can demonstrate different knowledge-hiding behaviours. By understanding knowledge hiding and its antecedents, managers can endeavour to overcome such behaviours that can constrain organisational learning and development. However, despite the significant destructive influences of employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours on organisations and the obvious links between employees' personality traits and their knowledge-hiding behaviours, literature on the relationship between employees' personality traits and knowledge-hiding behaviours is scarce. Indeed, the researchers have brought to the fore several antecedents and consequences of employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours in the organisational context (e.g. Connelly and Zweig, 2015; Černe et al., 2014; Peng, 2013; Connelly et al., 2014; Bogilović, Černe, and Škerlavaj, 2017). However, a recent call (Connelly et al., 2017) rightly highlights that the literature on the contingencies, antecedents and outcomes of employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours is still in its infancy.

To contribute to filling these gaps in the literature, this study explores the links between employees' personality traits and their knowledge-hiding behaviours. By using a single case study as a research methodology and collecting data through 28 semi-structured interviews from employees working in Alpha Electronics (a pseudonym for the company to maintain anonymity) operating in Pakistan, we foreground the patterns of relationships between employees' personality traits and knowledge-hiding behaviours: rationalised hiding, evasive hiding and playing dumb. The contribution is imperative given the potential destructive influences of employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours on organisational learning, innovation and manager's endeavours to gain competitive advantage as well as the dearth of research on the antecedents and outcomes of knowledge hiding.

Other than theoretical contributions, our study provides important managerial implications. The study suggests that if managers appropriately manage personality diversity, they can discourage knowledge-hiding behaviours and can overcome hindrances relevant to such destructive employee behaviours in team learning and performance. Moreover, understanding employees' personality differences, managers can improve team learning and performance, as the personality has more direct and powerful effects on group processes than other group composition variables (Moynihan and Peterson, 2001). Moreover, we propose that managers can intervene through different strategies such as linking rewards and providing training to inspire employees to share knowledge and demonstrate more prosocial behaviours that are constructive for other employees' learning and development to help organisations build competencies and improve the quality of their products, services and organisational practices. An important potential implication relates to employee selection process, where personality assessment results can be used to predict future knowledge-hiding

behaviour. Our findings can be helpful for organisations particularly from emerging economies faced with the challenges relevant to the shortage of skills and knowledge, as discouraging knowledge-hiding behaviours can improve employees' development and learning and enhance the pace of organisational learning.

## **PERSONALITY AND KNOWLEDGE HIDING**

Knowledge hiding is not the opposite end of the knowledge sharing continuum; in other words, the absence of knowledge sharing does not mean the presence of knowledge hiding. Rather these two are conceptually distinct constructs (Connelly et al., 2012; Ford and Staples, 2010). Knowledge hiding is an intentional concealment of knowledge that has been requested by another individual. The motivations behind knowledge hiding and the lack of knowledge sharing differ from each other. Lack of knowledge sharing is not an intentional effort to conceal the knowledge; the reason behind lack of sharing might likely to be the lack of knowledge. On the contrary, knowledge hiding does not include situations where individuals fail to provide knowledge due to being ignorant or by mistake (Connelly et al., 2012).

Some other authors use the term "knowledge withholding" to refer to knowledge hiding behaviour. For example, knowledge withholding is defined by Lin and Wang (2012) as concealing knowledge that is valuable and important for others. The behaviour of knowledge withholding has also been addressed as a form of social undermining at work by Duffy, Ganster, and Pagon (2002); i.e. an individual may engage in active or passive undermining behaviour at work by withholding the needed knowledge, making ridiculous comments and giving 'silent treatment' to others. The seminal authors of the concept, Connelly et al. (2012), suggest that only active and intentional attempts to conceal knowledge are included in the definition of knowledge hiding.

The scarce literature of knowledge hiding highlights different motives for hiding knowledge. For example, Connelly et al. (2012) found the positive relationship between the complexity of knowledge and knowledge-hiding behaviour. That is, the more complex the requested piece of knowledge is, the more likely the employee would be engaged in knowledge hiding. The same study also discussed interpersonal dynamics between hider and seeker and empirically tested the positive relationship between distrust and knowledge-hiding behaviour. To further learn the effects of distrust in relation to knowledge-hiding consequences, Černe et al. (2014) studied the interpersonal distrust loop to illustrate the relationship between creativity and knowledge hiding. Drawing on social exchange theory, they concluded that the knowledge hidiers end up hurting their own creativity because of concealing knowledge from their co-workers.

Individuals have their own unique personality and their personality is exhibited through their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Personality is the visible aspect of someone's character i.e. how individuals present themselves to others in various social situations. Peng (2013) added the aspect of individuals' personal attributes to the knowledge-hiding literature by studying the effects of knowledge-based psychological ownership on knowledge-hiding behaviour. He encourages us to study the effects of other individual variables like conscientiousness, one of the 'Big Five' personality traits, on the relationship between territoriality and knowledge hiding. Serenko and Bontis (2016) also look forward to spotting the influences of personality or gender on the dyadic relationship between two individuals who choose to share or hide knowledge from each other.

Individual differences as dispositional factors may help to find the patterns of knowledge-hiding behaviours in relation to employees' specific personality traits, which would enable the researchers to study these effects on the relationships between knowledge hiding and other antecedents: interpersonal dynamics between the hider and the seeker as studied by Connelly et al. (2012) and Černe et al. (2014) and knowledge-based psychological

ownership as studied by Peng (2013). Thus, exploring employees' knowledge-hiding behaviours in relation to the individuals' personality traits is important to advance the research in this domain.

Personality literature presents many theoretical approaches and the 'Trait Approach' is one of them. Further, the Big Five (Five Factors Model) of personality (John, Naumann, and Soto, 2008; McCrae and Costa, 2008) is one of the widely-used personality traits models. It suggests five personality dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (McCrae and John, 1992). In this study, we explored the relation of knowledge-hiding behaviour with only one personality dimension: extraversion. Extraversion has two ends of the spectrum; the people with high scores on this scale are extroverts while the people with low scores are introverts. Hence, our research question is "how does the personality trait extraversion influence the manifestation of individuals' knowledge-hiding behaviour?".

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A single case study was used as a research methodology, as it facilitates in-depth exploration of the understudy social phenomena (Yin, 1994). The study employed a qualitative approach to gain insights into the relation between personality and three facets of knowledge-hiding behaviour. As the domain of knowledge hiding is still growing and dispositional influences on knowledge hiding remain largely unexplored, we carried out a qualitative research study to gain insights into the relation between personality trait (extraversion) and three facets of knowledge-hiding behaviour.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the employees and managers working at different levels in Alpha Electronics, an electronic products manufacturing company operating in Lahore, Pakistan. The participation in the study was voluntary and the interviewees signed consent forms. The average duration of the interviews was almost 90 minutes. The interviewees consisted of 15 males and 13 females with the work experience ranging between 2 and 15 years. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees were coded as E1, E2, E3, and so on. Thematic analysis was used for analysis and interpretation of audiotaped data collected during semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis identifies, analyses and records patterns (themes) within the data. Based on the key themes that emerged from the data, the respondents were categorised as extroverts and introverts. Then we identified different knowledge-hiding behaviours from the data. Finally, we compared extroverts and introverts with the knowledge hiding behaviours to create links between personality and knowledge-hiding behaviours.

The key themes relevant to extraversion, introversion, and knowledge hiding that emerged from our data are presented in Table 1 along with their respective codes and some supporting quotations.

**Table 1. Themes, codes and quotes**

Themes	Codes	Quotes
Extraversion	Sociable	<p>"I enjoy social gatherings like family function, children events, workplace events and various other events, not one in particular." (E1)</p> <p>"Yes I am very social and like to interact with different kinds of people." (E22)</p> <p>"Absolutely, I enjoy social, official, personal, family and recreational gatherings." (E15)</p>
	Enjoy being	"I would feel good If I become center of attention in any

	center of attention	social gathering.” (E1) “You know I like people notice my presence. I like people giving attention to me”. (E15) “Social gathering should all be about me and my presence”. (E14)
	Talkative	“I am very talkative.” (E11) “Yes I am very talkative.” (E21)
	Comfortable in talking to strangers	“I generally get comfortable with strangers easily and quickly.” (E5) “I always feel comfortable talking to unknown people very quickly.” (E9) “I take some time to observe people and then start conversation to the ones I feel I can talk to.” (E14)
	Prefer working in team	“I would prefer working in a team rather than working alone.” (E10) “I already do work with teams and I really enjoy it.” (E15) “I like to do interactive tasks and would opt for it.” (E17)
	Resolve conflicts actively	“In case of conflict with a colleague, I play an active role to pursue the matter and try to resolve it in good manner.” (E10) “In case of conflict, I tend to take active part for resolving the issue.” (E17)
Introversion	Less sociable	“I like meeting with friends specially when I see them after long and it feels nice. Otherwise, I don’t enjoy social gatherings where there are strangers and I get bored.” (E3) “I only enjoy meeting with people I really like. Otherwise I am somewhat reserved.” (E4)
	Uncomfortable being center of attention	“I would blush if I find myself as center of attention in any social gathering.” (E18) “I usually stay away. I do not want to or try to gain attention”. (E23)
	Less talkative	“I don’t talk much. Generally people perceive that I am a reserved kind of person who talks less.” (E23) “I am not that talkative. I usually keep silent and give my opinion on matters if I am asked to do so”. (E3)
	Do not initiate conversation with strangers	“I will remain a silent observer among strangers and will only talk when I am asked something. I won’t initiate discussion.” (E13) “I prefer to observe. I often won’t take initiatives” (E4)
	Prefer working alone or in one-on-one	“I would like to choose tasks which are more challenging. But if tasks are same, I’ll prefer working alone.” (E6) “I prefer working in small groups or on tasks involving one-on-one interaction.” (E27)
	Resolve conflict passively	“In case of conflict with a colleague, I try to step back and don’t take initiative to resolve it. I tend to think that the matter will be resolved later.” (E26)

		“In case of conflict, I would give space to other person, will just sleep over it for some time and then will communicate.” (E12)
Knowledge hiding	Rationalised Hiding	“I told the person requesting access to a dataset resource that I am still experimenting with it and my work is under process. That’s why I can’t share it with him.” (E3) “If the information is confidential then I would straightaway say that I can’t disclose it.” (E12) “I don’t do delaying tactics either I provide information or I refuse straightaway. I don’t keep anyone in the intermediate state.” (E18)
	Evasive Hiding	“I use delaying tactics by saying that I don’t get your question and then provide incomplete information or provide information in a way that makes it difficult to extract the exact information he required.” (E1) “If I don’t want to share some knowledge, I try not to refuse it straight but to handle the situation tactfully.” (E5) “If any of my colleagues demands confidential information, I don’t refuse straight forwardly. I handle it tactfully.” (E21) “I didn’t convey the reason explicitly but I gave her indirect cue that I was not happy with her behaviour.” (E17)
	Playing Dumb	“Usually, I pretend as if I don’t have any information to avoid such requests.” (E21) “As he was my senior, I had to hide the fact that I had the material with me which I didn’t want to share.” (E4)

## FINDINGS

### Extraversion

Extraversion is one of the five main traits of the Big Five personality theory. A person who is extrovert is the life of the party, talks frequently with people, enjoys gatherings, is highly sociable and is friends to all. The following codes were used to highlight different aspects of respondents’ personality on extraversion trait (respective quotations are presented in Table 1).

### *Sociable*

Sociable people usually are people for parties and fun. They like to be in contact with different people and also like to make many friends. The statements of the participants depict that the participants like to attend parties, enjoy social gatherings and like to interact with different kinds of people.

### *Enjoy being centre of attention*

Extroverts like to be adored and enjoy being the centre of attention in any gathering, be it professional or casual. The quotes show that extroverts do not shy away from public attention. Rather, they like and enjoy being a central figure in any gathering.

### *Talkative*

People who talk more and tend to chat on different topics and enjoy communication are usually referred to as extroverts. The respective quotes strengthen this idea.



***Comfortable talking to strangers***

Besides friends, family or acquaintances, extroverts also find it rather easy to get into discussion with a stranger and feel no reluctance in doing so. The quotations validate the idea that extroverts find it comfortable and easy to talk with people they are not familiar with.

***Prefer working in a team***

The people who like to work in teams or groups are most likely to be extroverts than the people who tend to work individually to achieve a task. The responses suggest that they prefer to work in collaboration with other people as a team.

***Resolve conflicts actively***

In case of conflicts between people, extroverts tend to resolve the issues by actively taking steps or contributing to the resolution. The respondents, when asked about their response in the case of a conflict, indicate that they try to play an active part to resolve an issue.

***Introversion***

Introversion is the opposite end of the extraversion trait. Introverts are less talkative, feel indifferent towards social activities, feel uncomfortable when they find themselves in the centre of social attention, and feel less lively and optimistic than others do. The following codes were used to highlight different aspects of respondents' personality on low extraversion (respective quotations are presented in Table 1).

***Less sociable***

Introverts do not like much gatherings and keep their friend circle to a few people and like to meet only those people whom they know already and are comfortable with. The quotes also show that frequent public gatherings make them bored because they are usually reserved by nature.

***Uncomfortable being centre of attention***

Introverts usually do not have the desire to stand in the limelight; they feel uncomfortable and do not enjoy if they become the centre of attention in any public gathering. The quotes show that the respondents would be shy and would not be much at ease if they are the centre of attention in social meetups.

***Less talkative***

People who tend to talk less do not seem to express themselves very explicitly; they don't really like to make small talk or gossip. Less talkative people mostly fall in introvert personality type.

***Do not initiate conversation with strangers***

The people who feel uncomfortable in the company of people whom they do not know also tend to remain somewhat quiet and try not to start a conversation with strange people. The quotes suggest that they would like to observe people whom they do not know rather than getting into active interaction with them until they are explicitly asked to do so.

***Prefer working alone or in one-on-one***

To accomplish a task or complete a job, introverts tend to work by themselves or with fewer people, rather than working with big teams and groups of people. The quotes suggest that they have a tendency to work either alone or with least people to achieve goals. Unless the task is too challenging to be completed alone, they prefer working individually.

***Resolve conflicts passively***

Most of the times, in case of an issue or conflict between coworkers, introverts react passively. The respective quotes indicate that in case of any conflict with their colleagues, they will not take the initial steps to resolve the matter; rather they will step back and think over the issue and then may communicate or let it get resolved later.

### **Knowledge hiding**

We found three manifestations of knowledge-hiding behaviours.

#### ***Rationalised hiding***

Rationalised hiding behaviour is exhibited when the hider withholds knowledge by giving a specific reason(s) or rationale behind his/her behaviour, by blaming others to justify his/her inability to fulfill the request, or by responding with plain 'no'. The quotes in Table 1 show that respondents high on the introversion manifest rationalised hiding behaviours by giving the reason behind their inability to provide requested knowledge. They also hide knowledge with the plain 'no' and do not want to keep the requesting person in any doubt. In sum, introverts demonstrate rationalised knowledge hiding.

#### ***Evasive hiding***

Evasive hiding behaviour is exhibited when the hider, upon request to share some knowledge, agreed to help but never really intended to, provided some part of that knowledge and kept the rest of it to himself, supplied different information than was requested, or used delaying tactics. As shown in Table 1, that the extroverts, upon being asked about knowledge they do not wish to share, tend to handle the request tactfully and do not explicitly state their intention of not sharing knowledge. They exhibit evasive hiding behaviours either by sharing incomplete information or by using delaying tactics to carefully handle the situation.

#### ***Playing dumb***

Playing dumb behaviour is exhibited when the hider, upon being asked for some knowledge, pretends that (s)he does not possess such information at all even when (s)he has that knowledge, or simply by pretending that (s)he doesn't know what the other is talking about. The findings suggest that, in some specific situations such as when they feel that evasive and rationalised hiding carry some risk, both extroverts and introverts tend to play dumb.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our study explored the relationship between personality and knowledge-hiding behaviours. For this purpose, we used a single case study of Alpha Electronics, collected data through 28 semi-structured interviews and analysed data using thematic analysis. The data we collected revealed some interesting patterns between personality and knowledge-hiding behaviours. By analysing the data, we found that 60% of our respondents represented the personality characteristics usually affixed to extroverts. They not only enjoy being part of various social gatherings, but also enjoy being the centre of attention in such gatherings. Our respondents on the higher end of extraversion are generally talkative and can easily initiate conversation with strangers. Almost all such respondents acknowledged that they make the first move to start conversation with unknown people whenever they have to stay in a situation surrounded by many strangers like, sitting in waiting rooms, during long travels, etc. Furthermore, the extroverts prefer to work in teams rather than working alone; they feel themselves more energetic while working in a collaborative group setting. Another common attribute we found in our extrovert respondents is their active role in conflict handling; most of them recounted experiences in which they actively played their part in conflict resolution by bridging the communication gap. Even, some of them explained how they volunteered for the role of mediator in resolving conflicts between their teammates.



The rest (40%) of respondents demonstrate the personality characteristics usually affixed with the low end of extraversion, i.e., introversion. They showed less sociable tendencies; they only like to meet with their friends and likeminded people one-on-one or in small gatherings instead of large get-togethers. Some of them disclosed that they only join social gatherings when they feel compelled to do so. They do not like being the centre of attention and try to avoid such situations. They usually are less talkative and do not initiate conversation. When they have to stay at a place surrounded by many strangers, like in waiting rooms, during long travel, or any networking event, they usually like to read some book or newspaper, listen to others and observe things around them instead of being an active part of conversation. The majority of introverts in our study prefer working independently instead of working in a group; and a few of them added that they do like to work in a one-on-one communication situation instead of working in large groups.

Extroverts did not present even a single situation, in which they ever exhibited rationalised hiding. Most of their responses revealed that extroverts are more likely to hide their knowledge in indirect way, i.e., evasive hiding. The sociable nature of extroverts explains the reason behind not responding with plain 'no'. In order to maintain their good social relations at workplace, they tend to handle the situation tactfully when they neither want to give information or lose good relations with their colleagues. Along the same lines, introverts did not present any situation in which they ever exhibited evasive hiding. All of their responses revealed that introverts are more likely to exhibit rationalised hiding behaviour whenever they were exposed to the situations where they wanted to withhold information. Again, their self-centered nature explains such behaviour.

Only a few of our respondents (both extroverts and introverts) revealed 'playing dumb' behaviour. By carefully examining the statements of those respondents, we came to know that the situations in which they exhibited 'playing dumb' behaviour was one where they had to respond to a knowledge-seeking request from their senior colleagues, particularly their managers. Thus, we uncovered that when people realise the drastic consequences of providing misleading or incomplete information, they tend to play dumb instead of using evasive or rationalised hiding as in such cases, evasive and rationalised hiding could be harmful to their job and career-related interests and motives. Conclusively, the findings of our research study show that the individual differences can explain various knowledge-hiding behaviours at workplace.

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