How Knowledge Sharing Mediates the Effects of Internal Marketing on Customer Orientation

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DOI: 10.34190/EKM.21.145

Abstract: A growing body of research has demonstrated the growing importance given to two areas of business management: internal marketing and knowledge management. Nevertheless, these seldom areas are considered together. This paper explores the importance of knowledge sharing as a mediating variable in the relationship between internal and external marketing. Thus, our research presents an investigation model where the influence of tacit knowledge sharing and explicit knowledge sharing are presented. The data of this research was collected from the employees of a company in the logistics sector, through a face-to-face questionnaire. The proposed research hypotheses were tested empirically through structural equation modeling (PLS-PM) with a bootstrapping procedure. The results demonstrate that internal marketing has a positive effect on knowledge sharing and, consequently, on customer orientation. In this sense, through this paper, managers can verify the importance of knowledge sharing (tacit and explicit) in leveraging the effects of internal marketing in customer orientation.

Keywords: Knowledge Management; Knowledge Sharing; Internal Communication; Customer Orientation

1. Introduction

Evidence indicates that, in terms of customer relationship, while most companies consider themselves to be very customer-oriented, few customers agree with that assumption (Herhausen et al., 2018).

In fact, it's service employees who, through their attitudes and behaviors, help the company's customers to create a positive image by making services more tangible (Cavaliere et al., 2019, Kusluvan et al., 2010).

Customers make judgments about the company's ability through the behavior and relationship they establish with employees (Cavaliere et al., 2019). In this sense, Cavaliere et al. (2019) refers that knowledge can facilitate the development of new services, promote innovative behaviors of employees and, improve employee responses to their customers, thus improving the quality of service. In this context, it is essential to understand what motivates employees to adopt customer-oriented behaviors (Herhausen et al., 2018), where the dissemination of knowledge, for example about customers, triggers organizational learning processes, enhancing the development of individual capacities and organizational (Rese et al., 2020, Cummings, 2004, Renzl, 2008).

The interaction between individuals expands individual knowledge and the dimensions of internal marketing (internal communication and rewards) play an important role in knowledge sharing (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2018) resulting in new and enriched sets of knowledge. In addition, the knowledge sharing process triggers the conversion of individual knowledge into organizational knowledge (Cavaliere et al., 2019).

Therefore, understanding that the behavior of contact employees contributes to the construction of customer satisfaction and to a high perception of service quality (Cavaliere et al., 2019), the objective of our research is to investigate the influence of sharing knowledge in the adoption of customer-oriented behaviors in a transport services company, which fills a gap in the literature since research on knowledge sharing in the logistics services sector is sparse.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Knowledge sharing

Knowledge management refers to any process or practice of creating, consolidating, reusing or sharing knowledge (Ferreira et al., 2015; Hwang, 2020). Knowledge sharing is more meaningful than knowledge generation, as it helps organizations to capitalize resources based on knowledge (Sun et al., 2020).

Knowledge sharing between individuals, teams or companies has gained importance in business research and practice (Santo et al., 2019; Rese et al., 2020, Scuotto et al., 2020), as employees tend to share a variety of forms of knowledge: work-related documents, organizational rules, work procedures, personal experience and know-how (Ferreira et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2020).

In the literature, knowledge sharing is defined as:

- Activities aimed at transferring or disseminating knowledge from one person, group or organization to another (Hwang, 2020);
- The set of behaviors of individuals that allow the transfer of their knowledge to other members of the organization (Lee et al., 2020);
- The mutual exchange and absorption of knowledge between individuals and groups (Pittino et al., 2018; Davenport and Prusak, 1998);
- The behavior of a company's employees in giving and receiving knowledge from among the different knowledge units of the company (Shujahat et al., 2019);
- The transmission behavior in which individuals disperse their knowledge and experiences obtained to other individuals (Zhang et al., 2017).

The process of knowledge sharing involves the reciprocal exchange of knowledge (Lee et al., 2020) and encourages the emergence of entrepreneurial behaviors at the organizational level through the conversion of individual knowledge into organizational knowledge (through the combination and socialization of experiences between individuals) (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and through knowledge of the collective experience (Pittino et al., 2018).

Reciprocal exchange involves the request for knowledge, the need to acquire new ideas and information from employees, but it also involves the willingness of employees to help others in the development of new skills (Kim and Lee, 2013).

Knowledge sharing can be categorized into formal vs. informal elements (Shujahat et al., 2019), however, the current literature focuses on the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge sharing due to influences on organizational results, company performance, productivity and competitive advantage (Ha et al., 2019).

Tacit knowledge or explicit knowledge depends on its source and its format (Hwang, 2020). The sharing of tacit knowledge refers to the process of sharing experiences, subjective insights, perceptions and intuitions while the sharing of explicit knowledge refers to the process of sharing knowledge encoded in formal information, such as documents, reports, procedures or business policies(Nonaka and Konno, 1998; Santo et al., 2019; Rese et al., 2020,). Thus, explicit knowledge is expressed in a formal language, so that it can be adequately represented, stored, shared and applied. On the other hand, tacit knowledge contains a lot of contextual information and remains in the minds of the people who obtained it through work experience (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Although explicit knowledge is easily transmitted through oral and written communication (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Lee et al., 2020), tacit knowledge requires an interpersonal exchange where the knowledge transmitted has to be reconstructed by its recipient, so (Rese et al., 2020) describe that knowledge sharing is a person-to-person process. Despite this, most of the knowledge obtained at work is in the form of tacit knowledge, in the mind of each individual (Hwang, 2020).

2.2 Internal communication

Sun et al. (2020) suggest that employee knowledge sharing has internal communication as its antecedent since it can awaken the incentive for knowledge sharing by employees.

Internal communication is one of the areas of public relations with increasing interest and has been widely studied in different disciplines, including management and marketing. Internal communication appears as a co-created process between the organization and its employees (Lee and Yue, 2020) which Jackson and Welch (2007) define as the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders within organizations. Consequently, internal communication is a key factor for organizational effectiveness and is defined as communication between an organization's strategic managers and the company's internal stakeholders (Hwang, 2020, Duthler and Dhanesh, 2018). Kalla (2005) described internal communications as all formal and informal communications that occur internally and at all levels of an organization (Lee and Yue, 2020).

Due to the complex and multidisciplinary nature of internal communication it is also seen in several ways, however, internal communication is referred to as internal public relations, communications between employees, internal marketing or intra-organizational communication (Lee and Yue, 2020). In this study, we understand internal communication as a dimension of internal marketing.

In this context, the internal communication carried out can influence stakeholders within the organization (Duthler and Dhanesh, 2018), stimulates the contribution of employees to the organization, motivates employees to seek and share relevant knowledge for solving problems and facilitates the knowledge flow within an organization (Hwang, 2020). This communicative environment can stimulate employees' intentions to share their ideas and knowledge (Hwang, 2020). In this sense, our study proposes to study the following research hypothesis:
H1: Internal communication has positive effects on the sharing of tacit knowledge (H1a) and on the sharing of explicit knowledge (H1b).

2.3 Rewards

Literature identifies other motivations for knowledge sharing such as individual benefits and collective benefits (Rese et al., 2020).

The rewards in organizations refer to the benefits that employees receive in the company. These rewards, which can be extrinsic or intrinsic and consist of monetary incentives (salary increases and bonuses) or non-monetary incentives (promotions and job security) (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).

In the existence of rewards, employees' attitudes towards knowledge sharing are directly influenced by the formal incentives that the organization offers (Podrug et al., 2017). According to Social Exchange Theory employees contribute to the company's success in response to rewards (Soto-Acosta et al., 2017).

Therefore, rewards and incentives are inspiring factors for knowledge sharing (Podrug et al., 2017) since increase the affective commitment of employees which makes them more cooperative (Cavaliere et al., 2019). In this sense, our study proposes to study the following research hypothesis:
H2: Rewards positively influence the sharing of tacit knowledge (H2a) and the sharing of explicit knowledge (H2b).

2.4 Customer Orientation

The knowledge shared by employees increases an organization's ability to be innovative in its processes and, in this sense, the company's performance is superior (Sun et al., 2020).

As a process, customer orientation describes a learning philosophy with customers, competitors and internally (Liu and Atuahene-Gima, 2018) and reflects a company's strategic focus on the market (Feng et al., 2019).

Narver and Slater (1990) defined market orientation as the processing and dissemination of information throughout the market as well as the ability to respond to market reactions (Singh et al., 2020). Market orientation has two dimensions: customer orientation and competition orientation (Liu and Atuahene-Gima, 2018). In this study we examine customer orientation by defining it as a set of beliefs (Adams et al., 2019), attitudes and behaviors (Herhausen et al., 2018) that puts the customer's interest first, without excluding from all other stakeholders, such as shareholders, managers and employees (Singh et al., 2020).

In this context, the knowledge sharing process helps to maximize the company's capabilities in managing its knowledge and allows employees to achieve objectives more efficiently (Ha et al., 2019).

In the context of service organizations, knowledge sharing behaviors can be considered as an oriented customer behavior through which individuals act in social interactions and in the organization to improve their own performance, the performance of colleagues and the performance of your organization (Cavaliere et al., 2019).

Therefore, expanding organizational knowledge increases the openness and availability to provide a high service quality, so the sharing of organizational knowledge is the basis for the development of organizational capacity to satisfy customers (Cavaliere et al., 2019) through orientation to the customer. Thus, our study proposes to study the following research hypothesis:
H3: Sharing tacit (H3a) and explicit (H3b) knowledge has positive effects on customer orientation

2.5 Conceptual model

In summary, the study presented here will test the relationships present in the following research model:

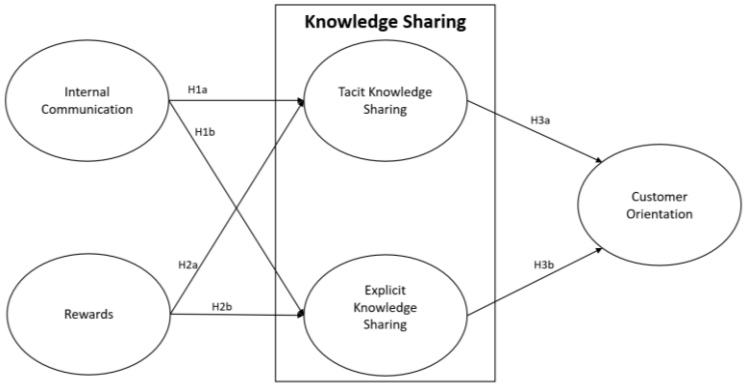

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

To validate the proposed model, a survey was conducted among workers of a road transport company. Our cross-sectional research had as unit of analysis this company, whose data collected through a questionnaire, was analyzed through the valid answers of 83 employees, mostly male (89.9%), over 40 years old (73%) and that were in the company for more than 4 years (54.4%).

Data was collected through a self-administered survey. To measure the constructs, we used items adapted from previous studies. Hence, to measure the constructs' items, for internal communication we used 6 items from Jacobs et al. (2016). For rewards we used the Reis and Braga (2016) items. The scale adopted for tacit knowledge sharing and explicit knowledge sharing followed the Wang and Wang (2012) items. Also, we measured customer orientation through Gerlach et al. (2016) items. All the items used in this study were measured using a 5-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

4. Results

We chose Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to estimate the conceptual model because it enables the researchers to assess causal relationships. The PLS-SEM is appropriate for exploratory research and does not require normality of data (Hair et al., 2016). Additionally, PLS-SEM is executed in two steps. First, we analyzed the reliability and validity of measurement model and secondly we analyzed the relations between constructs as suggested by (Hair et al., 2016). The PLS-Algorithm was executed on SMART PLS v3.3.2 (Ringle et al., 2015).

4.1 Common Method Bias

We collected responses from the same respondents and, there was a possibility of common method bias. Thus, we performed Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) with factor one representing 20.75% of the variance. Furthermore, we carry out a preliminary data analysis to validate VIF - Variance Inflactor Factor. VIF values are ranged between 1,272 and 4,121 which is below the threshold value (VIF <5). Therefore, there is no multicollinearity. Accordingly, common method bias would not be a concern. Moreover, we analyzed the

Skewness (Sk) and Kurtosis (Ku), and we saw that the items do not diverge from normality (Sk <3; Ku <7) (Hair et al., 2018).

4.2 Measurement Model Table 1:

The validity, reliability and standardized loadings (λ) were analyzed. Therefore, table 1 shows that standardized item loadings are above the minimum threshold value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2018), which were acceptable for further analysis.

Table 1: Items

	Item	Mean	SD	λ	Code
Internal Communication(α = 0.860; ρA = 0.869; CR = 0.896; AVE = 0.592)					
	I have confidence in communication within the company	3.52	1,009	0.781**	CMI01
	In this company, employees communicate a lot	3.19	0.989	0.834**	CMI02
	There is a variety of information circulating between departments	3.42	0.849	0.778**	CMI03
	In this company there is a lot of oral communication	3.39	1,015	0.821**	CMI04
	In this company there is a lot of written communication	3.69	0.903	0.612**	CMI05
	At TBM, each employee feels that they can communicate freely	3.61	1.003	0.770**	CMI06
Rewards (α = 0.808; ρA = 0.807; CR = 0.887; AVE = 0.723)					
	At TBM I have good professional opportunities	3.77	0.898	0.798**	REW01
	TBM practices above average base wages in this type of activity	2.80	1.018	0.872**	REW02
	I have a monthly remuneration that I wouldn't have at another company	2.74	1.058	0.878**	REW03
Explicit Knowledge Sharing (α = 0.703; ρA = 0.709; CR = 0.834; AVE = 0.627)					
	I know the information shared by others in company.	2.40	0.963	0.755**	EKS01
	People in my organization are facilitated by IT systems invested for knowledge sharing	3.17	1.022	0.802**	EKS02
	People in my organization are frequently encouraged by knowledge sharing mechanisms.	3.17	0.933	0.816**	EKS03
Tacit Knowledge (α = 0.860; ρA = 0.862; CR = 0.905; AVE = 0.705)					
	People with more experience, in my organization, frequently share knowledge.	3.40	0.954	0.832**	TKS01
	In my company there are many sessions to share information.	2.80	1.024	0.847**	TKS02
	In my company i can share my experiences	3.42	0.883	0.846**	TKS03
	People in my organization will share lessons from past failures when they feel necessary	3.39	0.898	0.832**	TKS04
Customer Orientation (α = 0.734; ρA = 0.759; CR = 0.848; AVE = 0.652)					
	I like to interact with TBM customers	4.15	0.743	0.730**	COO01
	Concern for customers is one of my personal goals	4.26	0.734	0.829**	COO02
	I am focused on TBM's customer needs	4.21	0.733	0.858**	COO03

λ - Standardized Loadings; ** p <0.01; SD = Standard Deviation; α = Cronbach's Alpha; AVE - Average Variance Extracted; CR - Composite Reliability

Table 1 also shows that Average Variance extracted (AVE) (ranging from 0.592 to 0.705) and composite reliability (CR) (ranging from 0.834 to 0.905) are above the threshold values (AVE> 0.5; CR> 0.7) (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). These values showed convergent validity and reliability for all constructs.

To access the discriminant validity, first we examine the Fornell and Larcker criteria (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and we verified that the correlations between constructs are below than square root values in diagonals of the AVE (table 2).

Table 2: Discriminant Validity - criteria from (Fornell and Larcker, 1981)

	ICO	REW	EKS	TKS	CO
Internal Communication (ICO)	0.769				
Rewards (REW)	0.643	0.851			
Explicit Knowledge Sharing (EKS)	0.757	0.631	0.792		
Tacit Knowledge Sharing (TKS)	0.742	0.680	0.704	0.839	
Customer Orientation (CO)	0.460	0.389	0.463	0.338	0.807

ICO = Internal Communication; REW = Rewards; EKS = Explicit Knowledge Sharing; TKS = Tacit Knowledge Sharing; CO = Customer Orientation

Second, we examined the discriminant validity through the cross-loadings criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). Table 3 shows a comparison of the column loadings and each indicator exhibits that indicator's loadings on its construct is higher in all cases compared to all its cross-loadings with other constructs.

Table 3: Cross Loadings

	ICO	REW	EKS	TKS	CO
REW01	0.477	0.798	0.542	0.590	0.336
REW02	0.641	0.872	0.527	0.617	0.355
REW03	0.520	0.878	0.538	0.524	0.299
CMI01	0.781	0.502	0.589	0.577	0.344
CMI02	0.834	0.596	0.610	0.674	0.265
CMI03	0.778	0.521	0.572	0.624	0.431
CMI04	0.821	0.501	0.618	0.628	0.427
CMI05	0.612	0.353	0.486	0.349	0.234
CMI06	0.770	0.468	0.610	0.531	0.410
EKS01	0.597	0.528	0.755	0.538	0.289
EKS02	0.611	0.419	0.802	0.560	0.258
EKS03	0.593	0.540	0.816	0.572	0.521
TKS01	0.605	0.550	0.521	0.832	0.291
TKS02	0.638	0.553	0.609	0.847	0.285
TKS03	0.676	0.596	0.665	0.846	0.295
TKS04	0.566	0.584	0.560	0.832	0.261
COO01	0.271	0.259	0.312	0.206	0.730
COO02	0.308	0.255	0.358	0.204	0.829
COO03	0.499	0.405	0.436	0.380	0.858

ICO=Internal Communication; REW= Rewards; EKS= Explicit Knowledge Sharing; TKS= Tacit Knowledge Sharing; CO=Customer Orientation

4.3 Structural model

To analyze the structural model, we examined the adjusted R^2 of the endogenous variables in our model, which are 0.599 for explicit knowledge sharing, 0.611 form tacit knowledge sharing and 0.195 for customer orientation.

Following, we examined the results of the hypotheses tests by evaluating the significance of the path coefficients through bootstrapping procedure with 5000 subsamples. We display on Table 4 the results of hypotheses testing.

Table 4: Hypothesis Test

Hyp.	Path	Std β	t value	p value	95% confidence Interval		f^2	
					Lower	Upper		
H1a	ICO → TKS	0.520	5.298	0.000	0.322	0.711	0.418	Supported
H1b	ICO → EKS	0.600	5.664	0.000	0.359	0.773	0.539	Supported
H2a	REW → TKS	0.346	3.253	0.001	0.125	0.541	0.185	Supported
H2b	REW → EKS	0.245	2.555	0.011	0.084	0.458	0.090	Supported
H3a	TKS→CO	0.023	0.135	0.893	-0.346	0.336	0.000	Not Supported
H3b	EKS→CO	0.447	2.980	0.003	0.184	0.775	0.128	Supported

β = Standardized path coefficients; ICO = Internal Communication; REW = Rewards; EKS = Explicit Knowledge Sharing; TKS = Tacit knowledge Sharing; CO = Customer Orientation

5. Discussion

To test the hypotheses under study we verified the analysis of the standardized path coefficients (Std β). In addition to this analysis, the significance of each relationship was verified through the Student's t value and p-value.

Reinforcing the role of internal communication, the H1a hypothesis is corroborated by our study ($\beta_{ICO \rightarrow TKS}$= 0.520; p<0.01; f^2= 0.418). From this analysis, we confirm that internal communication is a precedent for the sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge (Sun et al., 2020) and the communicative environment existing in organizations favors knowledge sharing.

In our study, knowledge sharing has positive effects on internal communication ($\beta_{ICO \rightarrow EKS}$= 0.600; p <0.01). Additionally, H1b has an effect size (f^2) equal to 0.539. According to Hair et al. (2016) f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for the significant independent variables represent weak, moderate and substantial effects, respectively. The relationship between internal communication and explicit knowledge sharing has substantial positive effects suggesting that internal communication motivates employees to seek to share ideas and solutions to problems and facilitates the flow of internal knowledge (Hwang, 2020). The H1b hypothesis is also supported by our study.

Social Exchange Theory suggests that rewards are a strong incentive for knowledge sharing (Soto-Acosta et al., 2017). The H2a hypothesis supports the positive effects of rewards on tacit knowledge sharing ($\beta_{REW \rightarrow TKS}$= 0.346; p <0.01; f^2= 0.185) and the H2b hypothesis suggests that the rewards influence the sharing of explicit knowledge ($\beta_{REW \rightarrow EKS}$= 0.245; p <0.05; f^2= 0.090). Our study confirms that rewards and incentives in organizations increase the collaborative environment and make employees more cooperative (Cavaliere et al., 2019). By analyzing the results of our study, we concluded that the effects of rewards on sharing tacit knowledge are stronger compared to the effects produced on sharing explicit knowledg0e, which have moderate effects. However, our study corroborates hypothesis H2.

An organization's ability to adjust and change its processes depends on sharing and internal communication. Knowledge sharing can be related to customer-oriented behaviors (Cavaliere et al., 2019). H3a hypothesis is not supported by our study ($\beta_{TKS \rightarrow CO}$= 0.023; p> 0.05; f^2=0.000). This result may be related to the size of the company and due to the diversity of customers with whom they operate.

Our study finds that explicit knowledge sharing influences customer orientation and is the basis for organizational development in developing customer-oriented activities. Our research supports the H3b hypothesis ($\beta_{EKS \rightarrow CO}$= 0.447; p <0.01; f^2=0.128) with positive effects of tacit knowledge sharing in customer orientation. Even if the company operates in supply chain management, as is the case with this transport company, knowledge management becomes central to achieve competitive advantage, especially when a company works in a network (Lee et al., 2020), hence tacit knowledge influences employees' customer orientation.

6. Conclusion

Consistent with the intangible and interactive nature of services, service organizations must improve the relationship between their employees and their customers. Our study investigated the role of knowledge sharing in customer orientation and found a significant relationship between explicit knowledge sharing and customer orientation. In this service environment studied by our investigation, we conclude that the formalization of knowledge in the form of reports or other documents influences the employees' customer orientation.

Our study also found that internal marketing (in the internal communication and rewards dimensions) influences the sharing of organizational knowledge (tacit and explicit).

These results demonstrate the importance of internal marketing in sharing knowledge. Companies should bet on internal communication and an efficient reward system in order to improve knowledge sharing. The effects of sharing explicit knowledge translate into a better quality of customer service, since employees will be more concerned and oriented towards meeting customer needs.

This study has some limitations, the main one being related to the generalization of results, which should be viewed with restraint, since there is a case study and a small sample. In future research, it would be interesting to extend the study to a more representative population and analyze the role of technological infrastructures in knowledge management.

Therefore, we suggest carrying out further studies with different samples, companies, and panel data. Although the literature mentions that trust (Sun et al., 2020) and organizational identification are critical antecedents of knowledge sharing, our study did not include these variables. We suggest new research that tests employees' trust and organizational identification as antecedents of knowledge sharing.

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