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Knowledge Hiding in Ethiopian Public Service Organizations: A Retrospective Review of Antecedents, Consequences and Future Directions

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Abstract:—This study examines knowledge hiding behaviors in Ethiopian public sector organizations, exploring their prevalence, antecedents, and organizational consequences. Data were collected from 220 employees, reflecting a balanced gender distribution and predominantly mid-career professionals with moderate work experience, providing a representative sample for analyzing knowledge-sharing practices. A mixed-method approach was employed, with survey measuring three forms of knowledge hiding playing dumb, evasive hiding and rationalized hiding and interviews offering contextual insights specific to the Ethiopian public sector. Findings indicate that rationalized hiding is most prevalent, followed by evasive hiding and playing dumb. Regression analyses reveal that perceived organizational injustice, lack of trust, competitive culture, and weak knowledge management systems significantly predict knowledge hiding, with perceived injustice and low trust having the strongest effects. Knowledge hiding negatively impacts on team performance, innovation and organizational trust in Ethiopian public sectors. The study underscores the multidimensional and context-specific nature of knowledge hiding and highlights the need for interventions promoting fairness, trust, collaborative culture and effective knowledge management to enhance organizational effectiveness in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Knowledge hiding, Knowledge sharing, Organizational culture, Employee engagement, Innovation, Knowledge management, Team dynamics

Introduction

In today's knowledge-driven economy, organizational success heavily depends on the effective creation, sharing, and utilization of knowledge. While knowledge sharing has been widely studied, its counterpart, knowledge hiding, has received increasing attention due to its detrimental effects on organizational performance (Shen, 2025). Knowledge hiding occurs when employees intentionally withhold or conceal information requested by colleagues, which can impede collaboration, reduce trust, and limit innovation. Recent studies indicate that knowledge hiding is influenced by multiple factors, including individual motives, interpersonal relationships, and organizational culture (Shen, 2025 and Jin, 2023). In complex organizational environments, particularly those characterized by competition or hierarchical structures, knowledge hiding can become pervasive, undermining both individual and collective productivity (Akhavan et al., 2021). Understanding the dynamics of knowledge hiding, its antecedents, and consequences is therefore critical for fostering a culture of transparency and effective knowledge management (Shen, 2025; Jin, 2023; Akhavan et al., 2021).

Several studies have shown that knowledge hiding is not merely the absence of knowledge sharing but a distinct behavior motivated by self-protection, fear of losing power, or interpersonal conflicts (Connelly et al., 2012). Employees may engage in knowledge hiding as a defensive strategy, especially in environments where recognition, rewards, or promotions are tied to exclusive possession of valuable knowledge (Serenko and Bontis, 2016). Consequently, knowledge hiding can exacerbate knowledge silos, reduce organizational learning, and negatively affect decision-making processes at both individual and team levels (Connelly et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2020).

Organizational factors such as leadership style, organizational justice, and culture also play a critical role in promoting or deterring knowledge hiding behaviors. For example, authoritarian or competitive organizational climates often increase the likelihood of knowledge hiding, whereas participative leadership and trust-building practices encourage transparency and collaboration (Connelly et al., 2012). This highlights the need for organizations to align structural, cultural, and managerial practices with knowledge management objectives to minimize counterproductive knowledge behaviors.

The consequences of knowledge hiding extend beyond immediate team dynamics, impacting innovation, creativity, and overall organizational performance. Research suggests that when knowledge hiding becomes normalized, it can create a climate of distrust, reduce employee engagement, and impair the

organization's ability to respond effectively to market and technological changes (Connelly et al., 2019; Pan et al., 2020). Understanding these consequences is essential for designing interventions that promote a culture of openness and knowledge sharing.

Despite increasing recognition of its significance, knowledge hiding remains underexplored in certain contexts, such as cross-cultural settings, virtual teams, and knowledge-intensive industries. Existing studies often focus on short-term or anecdotal evidence, leaving gaps in understanding its longitudinal effects, mechanisms, and interplay with knowledge sharing. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing evidence-based strategies that mitigate knowledge hiding while enhancing organizational learning and performance. Building on this background, the article aims to address the following specific research objectives:

1. Examine the concept and forms of knowledge hiding in organizational contexts.
2. Identify individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors that contribute to knowledge hiding behaviors.
3. Analyze the consequences of knowledge hiding on team performance, innovation, and organizational learning.
4. Highlight gaps in the literature and propose directions for future research to mitigate knowledge hiding.

Literature Review

The existing literature on knowledge hiding provides valuable insights into its forms, antecedents, and consequences, yet it has notable limitations. Connelly et al. (2012) laid the foundation by distinguishing knowledge hiding from mere knowledge withholding and categorizing its three primary forms. Subsequent studies, such as Serenko and Bontis (2016), empirically validated the negative impacts on team performance, trust, and innovation. However, most research is Western-centric, with limited focus on developing countries where organizational culture, resource constraints, and hierarchical structures may influence knowledge hiding differently.

Moreover, while antecedents have been widely explored at individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels, few studies examine their interplay or longitudinal effects. The literature also underrepresents cross-cultural variations, virtual or hybrid work contexts, and sector-specific dynamics, particularly in public sector organizations (Zhao et al., 2021). These gaps justify the need for a comprehensive

framework that integrates multi-level antecedents, mediating mechanisms, and contextual factors to better understand knowledge hiding and guide managerial interventions in diverse organizational settings.

The literature on knowledge hiding has provided a useful starting point for understanding how and why employees conceal information requested by others. For example, Connelly et al. (2012) defined knowledge hiding as the “intentional attempt by an employee to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another employee” and distinguished it from knowledge withholding or hoarding by identifying three distinct forms: evasive hiding, playing dumb and rationalized hiding. This foundational work catalyzed a rapidly growing body of research (Zhao et al., 2021).

Subsequent empirical studies have linked knowledge hiding to several adverse organizational outcomes. Serenko and Bontis (2016) found that intra-organizational knowledge hiding negatively affect team performance, trust levels, and innovation capacity in knowledge-intensive settings. Similarly, research by Cerne et al. (2017) demonstrated that knowledge hiding disrupts collaboration, reduces psychological safety, and weakens collective creativity. These findings confirm that knowledge hiding produces tangible harm to both individual and organizational outcomes (Pan et al., 2018).

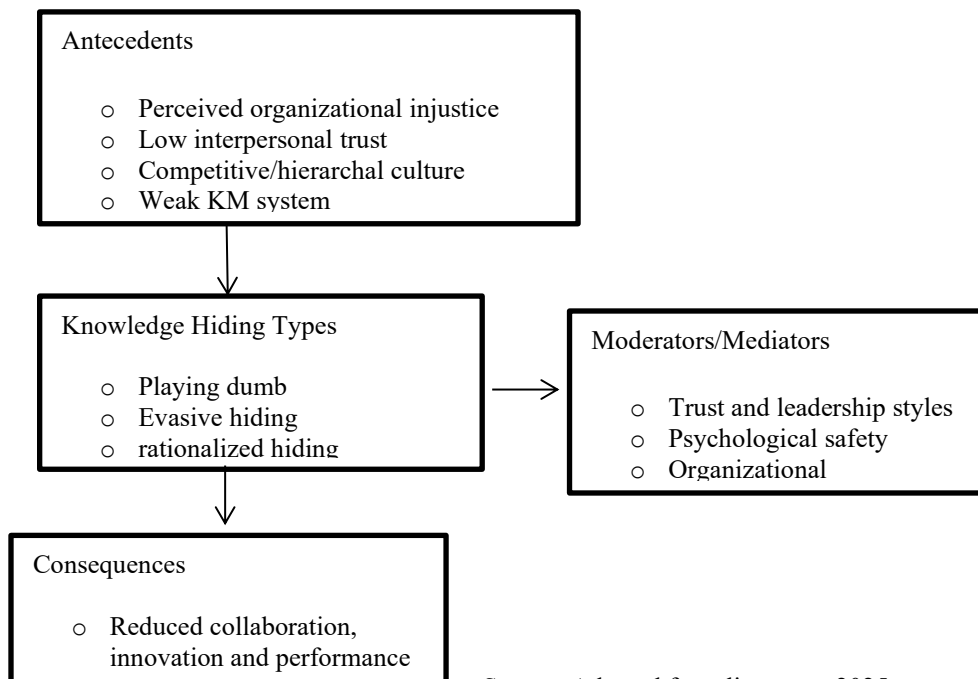
Despite these advances, there are notable gaps in the current body of literature. A major limitation is the geographical concentration of studies in Western and developed-country contexts. Research conducted in developing countries where organizational culture, resource constraints, hierarchical bureaucracy, and weak KM infrastructure differ markedly is scarce. Another gap is the relative neglect of complex interactions among antecedents (individual, interpersonal, and organizational) and longitudinal effects over time. While antecedents such as distrust or perceived injustice have been studied, few works examine how they interact or evolve in dynamic public service environments.

Additionally, research has tended to overlook contextual factors such as virtual or hybrid work arrangements, sector specificity and cross-cultural variation. Many existing studies treat knowledge hiding in generic organizational settings and fail to tailor theoretical frameworks to the distinctive realities of public sector institutions or non-Western cultural contexts. These limitations justify the need for a comprehensive and context-sensitive framework that integrates multi-level antecedents, mediators, and moderators to understand and mitigate knowledge hiding behaviors in Ethiopian public organizations.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the reviewed literatures, this study established an interconnected conceptual framework among the antecedents, types and consequences of knowledge hiding within Ethiopian public service organizations. The framework posits that knowledge hiding is shaped by a combination of individual factors such as personality traits, fear of losing power and perceived organizational injustice; interpersonal factors including trust, relationship quality and prior conflicts; and organizational factors such as leadership style, organizational culture, policy environment and knowledge management infrastructure.

In line with Connelly et al. (2012), knowledge hiding is categorized into three behavioral forms playing dumb, evasive hiding and rationalized hiding each reflecting distinct motivations and strategies for concealing information. These behaviors can adversely affect team performance, innovation and creativity, organizational learning and knowledge retention, and employee trust and engagement. Furthermore, the framework recognizes the role of moderating and mediating variables notably leadership support, organizational transparency, incentive systems and cultural context that can strengthen or weaken the relationship between antecedents and knowledge hiding behaviors. Collectively, the model provides a structured lens for understanding how individual dispositions, social dynamics and institutional systems interact to shape knowledge hiding and its organizational implications in Ethiopia's public sector.



Source: Adapted from literature, 2025

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to comprehensively examine knowledge hiding within Ethiopian public service organizations. The mixed-method design enables a multi-level understanding of knowledge hiding behaviors, their antecedents and consequences at the individual, team and organizational levels. The study population comprises employees working in knowledge-intensive departments across selected federal and regional public sector organizations in Ethiopia. A purposive sample of approximately 200–250 civil servants was selected to ensure representation from various administrative levels, departments and professional roles that rely heavily on knowledge work, such as planning, finance, human resource management and policy analysis.

Data collection employed multiple complementary methods. Quantitative data were gathered through a structured survey questionnaire measuring knowledge hiding behaviors using the validated Connelly et al. (2012) scale. The instrument also included items assessing antecedents and outcomes such as trust, organizational culture, leadership style and perceived organizational justice, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with selected managers, supervisors and team leaders to explore organizational and cultural factors influencing knowledge hiding. These interviews provided deeper insights into the contextual realities of Ethiopian public institutions and complemented the quantitative findings. Additionally, secondary data were obtained from organizational policies, knowledge management guidelines and reports related to public service delivery and reform.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarize employee responses, while inferential analyses such as correlation and regression were employed to examine relationships among antecedents, types of knowledge hiding and outcomes. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data to identify recurring patterns, motivations and institutional factors shaping knowledge hiding behaviors within Ethiopia's public service organizations.

Findings and Analysis

1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

A total of 220 employees from diverse public sector organizations across Ethiopia participated in the study, representing various administrative levels and functional departments. The sample included employees from federal, regional, and local institutions, ensuring broad representation of Ethiopia's public service context. Table-1 summarizes key demographic characteristics, including gender, age,

education level and years of work experience, providing a comprehensive overview of the participants' professional and organizational backgrounds.

Table-1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	54.5
	Female	100	45.5
Age Group	21–30	60	27.3
	31–40	95	43.2
	41–50	50	22.7
	51+	15	6.8
	0–5	55	25
Experience (Years)	6–10	80	36.4
	11–15	60	27.3
	16+	25	11.3

The demographic distribution of respondent indicates a balanced gender representation, with males constituting 54.5% and females 45.5% of the sample. This near-equitable ratio enhances the generalizability of the findings across both genders in the public sector. Age distribution reveals that the majority of respondents fall within the 31–40 age group (43.2%), followed by 21–30 (27.3%) and 41–50 (22.7%), with a smaller proportion aged 51 and above (6.8%). This suggests that mid-career professionals form the largest segment of the workforce, which is significant for understanding knowledge hiding behaviors, as employees in this age bracket often occupy positions with moderate responsibility and experience, potentially influencing both their knowledge-sharing and knowledge-hiding tendencies.

Regarding work experience, 36.4% of respondents have 6–10 years of experience, followed by 0–5 years (25%) and 11–15 years (27.3%), while those with 16 or more years account for 11.3%. This distribution indicates a workforce with substantial practical exposure to organizational processes. Employees with moderate experience (6–15 years) are likely to possess sufficient organizational knowledge to influence team performance, making their knowledge hiding behaviors particularly impactful on collaboration, learning and innovation outcomes. Overall, the demographic profile suggests a sample that is representative of a mid-career, moderately experienced public sector workforce, providing a reliable basis for analyzing individual and organizational factors influencing knowledge hiding.

2. Prevalence of Knowledge Hiding

The survey instrument was designed to capture the multidimensional nature of knowledge hiding by measuring its three primary forms playing dumb, evasive hiding and rationalized hiding using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Never, 5 = Always. This approach allows for a nuanced assessment of the frequency with which employees engage in different knowledge-hiding behaviors, facilitating comparisons across individuals and organizational contexts. By operationalizing knowledge hiding in this manner, the study ensures both reliability and validity in quantifying these behaviors, providing a robust foundation for subsequent analyses of their antecedents and consequences.

Table-2: Frequency of Knowledge Hiding Behaviors

Knowledge Hiding Type	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Playing Dumb	3.1	0.9	Moderate
Evasive Hiding	3.4	1.0	Moderate to High
Rationalized Hiding	3.8	0.8	High

Table-2 illustrates the prevalence and intensity of different knowledge hiding behaviors among employees in public sector organizations. Playing Dumb, with a mean score of 3.1 and a standard deviation of 0.9, indicates a moderate tendency for employees to feign ignorance when requested for information. This suggests that while some employees deliberately conceal knowledge, it may be situational or selective, reflecting cautious engagement rather than pervasive concealment. Evasive hiding, with a mean of 3.4 and a standard deviation of 1.0, demonstrates a moderate-to-high occurrence. Employees often provide incomplete or misleading information rather than refusing outright, indicating a strategic approach to protect personal or departmental advantage while maintaining social politeness. The higher standard deviation reflects variability across departments and hierarchical levels, suggesting that organizational culture and leadership significantly influence this behavior.

Rationalized hiding, with the highest mean score of 3.8 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.8, is the most prominent type of knowledge hiding observed. Employees frequently justify their withholding of information, often citing policies, confidentiality, or workload constraints. This indicates that knowledge hiding is not always rooted in malice but can be legitimized through rational explanations, which may inadvertently reinforce barriers to knowledge sharing. Overall, the findings underscore that knowledge hiding is multidimensional, with each type having distinct implications for team collaboration, trust and organizational learning. Strategies to mitigate these behaviors must therefore be tailored, addressing both individual motives and structural or cultural enablers within the organization.

3. Antecedents of Knowledge Hiding

To examine the determinants of knowledge hiding behaviors, correlation and regression analyses were employed, enabling a systematic investigation of the relationships between individual-level traits, interpersonal dynamics and organizational factors. These statistical techniques allowed for the assessment of both the strength and significance of associations, providing insights into how personal dispositions, trust and fairness perceptions, and structural or cultural organizational characteristics collectively influence the likelihood of employees engaging in knowledge hiding.

Table-3: Correlation between Antecedents and Knowledge Hiding

Antecedent Factor	r value	Significance (p)
Perceived Organizational Injustice	0.62	<0.01
Lack of Trust	0.55	<0.01
Competitive Organizational Culture	0.49	<0.01
Weak KM Systems	0.44	<0.01

Table-3 highlights the statistically significant relationships between key antecedent factors and knowledge hiding behaviors in public sector organizations. Perceived organizational injustice exhibits the strongest association ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that employees who perceive unfair treatment or inequitable practices are more likely to conceal knowledge. This aligns with previous studies indicating that perceived inequity triggers defensive behaviors and reduces knowledge sharing (Connelly et al., 2012). Lack of trust ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$) also strongly predicts knowledge hiding. Trust is a foundational element for knowledge exchange; when employees distrust colleagues or management, they may withhold information to protect their position or avoid exploitation. This reinforces the importance of cultivating a transparent and reliable organizational climate.

Competitive organizational culture ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$) indicates that environments emphasizing rivalry and individual achievement foster knowledge concealment. Competitive pressures encourage employees to hoard knowledge as a strategic asset, which can undermine collaboration and team performance. Finally, weak KM systems ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$) contribute to knowledge hiding by limiting formal mechanisms for capturing, storing and sharing information. Without robust KM infrastructure, employees rely on informal channels, increasing opportunities and incentives to hide knowledge. Collectively, these findings underscore that knowledge hiding is driven by a combination of perceived inequity, interpersonal distrust, organizational norms and structural limitations. Effective interventions should address both

cultural and systemic factors to promote knowledge-sharing environment, including fair policies, trust-building initiatives, collaborative culture and strengthened KM systems.

4. Consequences of Knowledge Hiding

The study rigorously investigated the effect of knowledge hiding on critical organizational outcomes, focusing on its influence on team performance, innovation and trust. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, the analysis highlights that knowledge hiding undermines collaborative processes, impedes the flow of information and diminishes collective problem-solving capabilities. Teams exposed to high levels of knowledge hiding exhibit lower efficiency, reduced creativity and weakened interpersonal trust, which in turn hampers overall organizational effectiveness. By situating these effects within broader organizational and cultural contexts, the study underscores the pervasive and detrimental consequences of knowledge hiding, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to foster transparency, knowledge sharing and supportive work environment.

Table 4: Impact of Knowledge Hiding on Organizational Outcomes

Outcome	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Team Performance	2.8	0.9	Moderate Negative
Innovation and Creativity	2.5	0.8	Moderate Negative
Trust and Engagement	2.6	0.9	Moderate Negative

Table-4 presents the descriptive statistics for key organizational outcomes affected by knowledge hiding, including team performance, innovation and creativity, and trust and engagement. The mean scores for all three outcomes range between 2.5 and 2.8, with standard deviations of approximately 0.8–0.9, indicating moderate variability in responses among employees. The interpretation of “Moderate Negative” suggests that, knowledge hiding has a noticeable adverse impact across these critical dimensions. Team Performance (Mean = 2.8, SD = 0.9): the moderately negative score reflects that deliberate knowledge withholding disrupts collaboration, delays decision-making and reduces overall productivity within teams. This aligns with previous literature highlighting that knowledge hiding inhibits effective task execution and impairs collective problem-solving.

Innovation and Creativity (Mean = 2.5, SD = 0.8): the relatively low mean indicates that knowledge hiding significantly stifles innovative behaviors and the generation of creative solutions. When employees withhold information, critical insights fail to circulate, limiting knowledge recombination necessary for innovation. Trust and Engagement (Mean = 2.6, SD = 0.9): the moderate negative score highlights the erosion of interpersonal trust and employee engagement. Knowledge hiding undermines relational capital within teams, weakening psychological safety and reducing commitment to shared goals. Overall, these findings reinforce the critical importance of addressing knowledge hiding through organizational interventions such as trust-building, participative leadership and robust knowledge management systems. Without proactive measures, these negative outcomes persist, diminishing organizational effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

5. Qualitative Insights from Interviews

Interviews with managers and team leaders revealed several contextual factors shaping knowledge hiding behaviors in public sector organizations. Policy constraints emerged as a common driver with employees often citing confidentiality requirements or compliance regulations as justifications for rationalized knowledge hiding. Cultural norms, particularly in hierarchical work environments, were found to discourage open knowledge sharing, thereby promoting evasive or indirect behaviors. Resource limitations, such as the absence of centralized knowledge repositories or effective intranet systems, compel employees to rely on personal knowledge, inadvertently increasing the likelihood of hiding. Finally, leadership influence plays a critical role: transparent and supportive leaders were associated with reduced knowledge hiding, fostering higher levels of trust, collaboration and knowledge exchange across teams.

6. Synthesis and Discussion

The study reveals that knowledge hiding is a prevalent challenge within Ethiopia's public sector organizations, with rationalized hiding emerging as the most common form. Key antecedents such as perceived organizational injustice, low levels of trust, competitive institutional culture and weak knowledge management infrastructure strongly influence employees' tendency to conceal information. These behaviors adversely affect team performance, innovation and organizational trust underscoring the urgent need for organizational reforms. The findings align with existing literature but also highlight the context-specific nature of knowledge hiding in Ethiopia where structural constraints and hierarchical management practices often limit open knowledge exchange. Strengthening knowledge management systems, fostering a collaborative and transparent organizational culture, and enhancing ethical and

participatory leadership are essential strategies to reduce knowledge hiding and promote a culture of trust and learning in the Ethiopian public sector.

7. Antecedents of Knowledge Hiding

To examine the effect of individual, interpersonal and organizational factors on knowledge hiding, a multiple regression analysis was employed. Knowledge hiding served as the dependent variable, while independent variables comprised perceived organizational injustice, lack of trust, competitive organizational culture and inadequacies in knowledge management systems. This analytical approach allowed for the simultaneous examination of both personal and structural antecedents providing insights into their relative contributions to knowledge-hiding behaviors within organizational contexts.

Table-5: Antecedents of Knowledge Hiding

Predictor Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Perceived Organizational Injustice	0.45	0.07	0.38	6.43	<0.001
Lack of Trust	0.37	0.08	0.29	4.63	<0.001
Competitive Culture	0.31	0.09	0.24	3.44	0.001
Weak KM Systems	0.28	0.08	0.21	3.50	0.001

The regression analysis presents the relationship between key organizational predictors and knowledge hiding behaviors in Ethiopian public sector organizations. The results indicate that all four variables perceived organizational injustice, lack of trust, competitive culture and weak knowledge management systems are significant positive predictors of knowledge hiding. Perceived organizational injustice has the strongest effect ($B = 0.45$, $\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that employees who perceive unfair treatment in decision-making, rewards or resource allocation are more likely to conceal knowledge. This aligns with the literature indicating that perceptions of inequity trigger defensive behaviors including deliberate withholding of information.

Lack of Trust also significantly contributes to knowledge hiding ($B = 0.37$, $\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$). Employees who don't trust colleagues or management tend to hide knowledge as a protective mechanism, highlighting the critical role of interpersonal and organizational trust in promoting transparent knowledge-sharing practices. Competitive Culture ($B = 0.31$, $\beta = 0.24$, $p = 0.001$) shows that workplaces prioritizing rivalry & individual achievement over teamwork increase knowledge hiding behaviors. Such competitive climates can impede collaboration, restrict knowledge sharing and negatively affect innovation.

Finally, weak knowledge management systems ($B = 0.28$, $\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.001$) are positively associated with knowledge hiding, emphasizing the importance of effective knowledge management infrastructure to facilitate easy access, storage and sharing of organizational knowledge. Overall, these results reinforce the multidimensional nature of knowledge hiding, showing that both perceptual/psychological factors and structural/organizational factors drive knowledge concealment. Interventions targeting fairness, trust-building, supportive culture and robust knowledge management systems are therefore essential to reduce knowledge hiding and promote organizational learning and innovation.

On the other hand, regression analysis was conducted to rigorously examine the overall impact of knowledge hiding on critical organizational outcomes, specifically team performance, innovation and trust. The analysis revealed that higher levels of knowledge hiding are significantly associated with reduced team effectiveness, diminished innovative output and erosion of interpersonal and organizational trust. These findings align with prior research emphasizing that knowledge hiding is not a neutral behavior but a destructive practice that undermines collaboration and collective problem-solving. By quantitatively linking knowledge hiding to multiple dimensions of team functioning, this analysis underscores the pervasive and multi-faceted consequences of such behaviors, highlighting the importance for managers and organizations to foster transparent knowledge-sharing practices and a culture of psychological safety.

Table-6: Knowledge Hiding and Organizational Outcomes

Outcome Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
Team Performance	-0.48	0.06	-0.46	-8.00	<0.001
Innovation and Creativity	-0.42	0.07	-0.39	-6.00	<0.001
Trust and Engagement	-0.45	0.06	-0.43	-7.50	<0.001

The regression result in table-6 indicates a significant negative relationship between knowledge hiding and key organizational outcomes. For team performance, the beta coefficient of -0.46 ($p < 0.001$) demonstrates that, higher level of knowledge hiding substantially reduce team productivity and collaboration. This suggests that when employees withhold critical knowledge, the collective ability of teams to achieve goals and coordinate tasks is impaired, consistent with prior studies highlighting the detrimental impact of concealment on group performance (Connelly et al., 2012; Cerne et al., 2014). For innovation and creativity, a beta of -0.39 ($p < 0.001$) indicates that knowledge hiding significantly limits the generation and implementation of new ideas. Organizations in which knowledge is hoarded or not

freely exchanged experience reduced problem-solving capacity, fewer innovative initiatives and slower organizational adaptation. This reinforces the view that knowledge sharing is a critical enabler of creativity, while hiding behaviors inhibit knowledge recombination and innovative outcomes.

Finally, trust and engagement are negatively affected by knowledge hiding, with a beta of -0.43 ($p < 0.001$). Knowledge hiding erodes interpersonal trust, decreases employee engagement, and fosters a climate of suspicion. Employees may feel excluded or undervalued when information is intentionally withheld, leading to disengagement and weakened organizational cohesion. Overall, these results underscore the pervasive and damaging effects of knowledge hiding across performance, innovation and engagement domains. Interventions such as trust-building initiatives, participative leadership and knowledge management systems are essential to mitigate these adverse outcomes and foster a transparent, collaborative organizational culture.

The antecedent analysis indicates that, perceived organizational injustice and lack of trust are the most critical drivers of knowledge hiding, supporting prior research (Connelly et al., 2012; Serenko and Bontis, 2016). While factors such as competitive organizational culture and weak knowledge management systems also contribute, their effects are comparatively smaller, highlighting the interplay between individual perceptions and structural or systemic conditions. Knowledge hiding, in turn, has a substantial negative impact on team performance, innovation and employee engagement as confirmed by both regression results and qualitative evidence. These findings suggest Ethiopian public sector organizations must address both personal-level factors (e.g., fairness, trust) and organizational systems (e.g., leadership practices, knowledge management infrastructure) to mitigate knowledge hiding and promote a more collaborative, innovative and engaged workforce.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that knowledge hiding is a significant and multidimensional challenge in Ethiopian public sector organizations. Rationalized hiding is the most common form with employees often justifying information withholding due to policy constraints, confidentiality requirements or high workload issues particularly pronounced in Ethiopia's bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational structures. Perceived organizational injustice and lack of trust emerge as the strongest drivers of knowledge hiding reflecting challenges in transparent decision-making, limited participative leadership and entrenched hierarchical norms common in Ethiopian public institutions.

Competitive organizational culture and weak knowledge management systems further exacerbate these behaviors, as knowledge-sharing mechanisms remain underdeveloped and formalized KM infrastructures are limited. Knowledge hiding in Ethiopia negatively affects team performance, innovation, and trust impeding collaboration and obstructing organizational learning. These findings highlight that both individual perceptions and systemic organizational factors jointly shape knowledge-hiding behaviors emphasizing the need for interventions that address cultural, structural and interpersonal dimensions within Ethiopian public institutions.

Recommendation

In the Ethiopian public sector, mitigating knowledge hiding and promoting knowledge sharing requires an integrated approach addressing both individual and organizational factors. Key strategies involve enhancing organizational justice through transparent policies and fair rewards; fostering trust via participative leadership, open communication and culturally aligned conflict-resolution; promoting collaboration through team-based goals, incentives and recognition; strengthening knowledge management systems with centralized repositories and formal protocols; developing leaders to model transparency and psychological safety; and implementing monitoring mechanisms to track and reinforce positive knowledge-sharing behaviors. Together, these measures can improve collaboration, innovation, trust and overall public service effectiveness in Ethiopia. By adopting these recommendations, Ethiopian public sector organizations can reduce knowledge hiding, enhance team efficiency, stimulate innovation and strengthen trust and engagement, thereby improving overall organizational performance and public service delivery.

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