

Knowledge Sharing in Multiple Team Membership (MTM) Environments: A Field Experiment in an IT Multinational

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Employees in knowledge-intensive organizations, such as IT, healthcare, and automotive, are often asked to work on multiple teams concurrently, a situation referred to as Multiple Team Membership (MTM, O’Leary et al., 2011; Margolis, 2020). Besides optimizing resource utilization, organizations use MTM to encourage learning and knowledge sharing across teams (Bertolotti et al., 2015; Mortensen and Gardner, 2017). Unfortunately, individuals working in multiple teams experience exhaustion and role overload (e.g., Berger and Bruch, 2021; Pluut et al, 2014), which can hamper their ability to effectively share knowledge within their multiple teams or consolidate their learning across teams. For example, Brennecke and Rank (2016) found that individuals in MTM environments often struggle with both sharing knowledge with others and seeking it from them. However, previous research has not explored how organizations can facilitate knowledge sharing and learning in these complex settings. Our study aims to understand how organizations can promote knowledge sharing and individual learning across teams when employees are simultaneously part of multiple teams.

A longstanding body of research underscores that sharing knowledge across groups is inherently challenging (e.g., Tagliaventi and Mattarelli, 2006). Two primary approaches to knowledge sharing have been investigated: structured and unstructured (e.g., Hansen et al., 1999; Haas and Hansen, 2007). In the structured approach, codified knowledge sharing is emphasized, where individuals participate in formal sessions or contribute to knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g., Di Vaio et al., 2021). In contrast, the unstructured approach focuses on tacit knowledge

sharing, where individuals engage in knowledge exchange more informally and autonomously (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2021). Both approaches have been found effective in fostering learning and knowledge sharing (e.g., Gupta et al., 2009). However, in an MTM setting, where individuals must contribute to multiple teams, finding time for structured knowledge-sharing initiatives can be difficult, if not unfeasible. Additionally, employees in knowledge-intensive organizations, who often value independence and flexibility, may see structured initiatives as a threat to their unique professional identities, which are rooted in autonomy (e.g., Mattarelli et al., 2022). We thus propose that a structured knowledge-sharing approach is less effective for learning than an unstructured one, especially for individuals working on multiple project teams.

To test our hypothesis, we conducted a field experiment within the R&D unit of a multinational IT organization developing security software. With top management support, we created two randomized treatment groups. In one group, employees from different teams were asked to participate in formally designed knowledge-sharing sessions (structured knowledge sharing sessions). In the second group, employees were supported in self-organizing knowledge-sharing groups (unstructured knowledge sharing sessions). Overall, there were 121 knowledge sharing sessions. Each person participated in between one to five sessions. In each session one employee acted as a facilitator, and one or more as knowledge providers. The sessions were conducted as video conferences, which were recorded and transcribed into Word files, including text conversations from the chat. Each session covered a specific topic, either introducing entirely new content for the organization, such as AI tools, or incremental improvements to content employees were already somewhat familiar with, e.g., security and cloud development.

We collected two waves of survey data—before and after implementing knowledge-sharing sessions—with 313 employees. We measured knowledge-sharing effectiveness based on individuals' perceptions of having acquired new knowledge on the topics covered in the sessions. Results from our analyses supported our hypothesis: structured knowledge-sharing sessions are less effective than unstructured ones, especially when individuals are part of multiple teams.

Further post-hoc analyses explored factors that moderated or explained these results, including the type of knowledge shared (e.g., entirely novel knowledge vs. incremental improvements) and patterns of interaction during the sessions. We discovered that unstructured knowledge-sharing sessions were particularly effective when the knowledge shared was entirely novel for the company. Upon an initial inspection of the patterns of interaction from session transcripts, we observed that unstructured sessions involved more interactions than structured ones. A possible explanation for our findings is that structured sessions may be perceived as an imposition, i.e. something individuals must attend to on top of their already busy schedules. It is also possible that, during structured sessions, employees were multitasking on other team projects. Furthermore, in knowledge-intensive contexts, individuals may be reluctant to share their expertise, especially if they feel pressured to do so in structured sessions.

We plan to present our preliminary results at Academy of Management Annual Meeting 2025 to contribute to a better understanding of knowledge sharing in contemporary team-based workplaces. By comparing structured and unstructured knowledge-sharing approaches, the study reveals that unstructured approaches are more effective for individuals working in multiple teams, especially for sharing novel knowledge. Unstructured sessions foster greater interaction and are less likely to be perceived as an additional burden on employees' schedules. These

findings highlight how organizations can better facilitate knowledge sharing and individual learning across teams, offering practical insights for managing knowledge-intensive contexts where employees face competing demands from their multiple teams.

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