



## **The Influence of Workplace Exclusion on Employees' Knowledge Hiding – Organizational Atmosphere as the Intermediary Variable**

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### **Abstract**

In today's increasingly scarce blue ocean market, enterprises have made more and more efforts to survive in the existing market and maintain competitive advantages. Enterprises with patent fortress or advanced technology can often lead the development direction of the industry and strive for their interests for themselves, and negative emotions brought about by workplace exclusion can inevitably destroy interpersonal relationships within organizations and hinder the flow of knowledge. Therefore, based on social exchange theories and ternary interaction determinism, this study explores the influence of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding within organizations and the mediating role of organizational atmosphere. After sorting and reviewing relevant literature, this paper proposes a theoretical model of workplace exclusion – organizational climate – knowledge hiding and collects data from Chinese enterprises through questionnaires. SPSS 27.0 and Process 4.1 were used for statistical data analysis. The results revealed that, first of all, workplace exclusion could positively affect knowledge hiding. Secondly, workplace exclusion could negatively affect the organizational climate in enterprises, which was consistent with previous research results. Thirdly, organizational atmosphere could negatively affect knowledge hiding. Fourthly, organizational climate was found to play a partial mediating role between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding. This study explains the mechanism of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding from the aspect of environment, filling the gaps of previous studies. Meanwhile, the research recommended that managers establish a good organizational atmosphere to restrain negative consequences caused by workplace exclusion to establish a more perfect knowledge management system.

**Keywords:** *Workplace exclusion, Organizational atmosphere, Knowledge hiding*

### **1. Introduction**

With the development of the times, the pace of life is getting faster and faster, and the competition between enterprises is becoming increasingly fierce. For modern enterprises, an efficient and complete knowledge management system can greatly enhance the innovation ability of enterprises, and improve the work efficiency of employees (He, 2021). For businesses in the information age, the fortress of knowledge is one of the most used means to gaining competitive advantage. An efficient and complete knowledge management system can improve the work efficiency of employees, enhance the innovation capacity of enterprises, and bring about stronger competitiveness. However, in the actual management process, many means to promote knowledge circulation among employees are difficult to achieve the expected effect (Liu & An, 2021). Therefore, some scholars have proposed knowledge hiding in the hope of studying knowledge transfer in enterprises from the reverse perspective.

On the other hand, Ferris, Brown, Berry, and Lian (2008) defined workplace exclusion as the neglect, exclusion and rejection that individuals feel subjectively from others or other groups in the workplace. Differences in leadership, department, behavior and cognition make the phenomenon of workplace exclusion always exist in businesses, which will affect the mental health and working attitude of employees, make it difficult to form a harmonious atmosphere among the members of the organization. In the research on the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding, Zhao, Xia, He, Sheard, and Wan (2016) verified the positive impact of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding in the service industry. Gao and He (2019) constructed a chain intermediary model with relationship identity and psychological distress as intermediary variables, which verified the positive impact of workplace exclusion

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on knowledge hiding. Riaz, Xu, and Hussain (2019) found that job tension can also mediate the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding, and employee loyalty can negatively regulate this relationship. Li (2021) also makes a supplementary study on the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding based on the theory of resource conservation. The positive effect of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding has been confirmed by many scholars, but there has been little researched on its intrinsic mechanisms. Most of them adopt the theory of resource preservation or are limited to a certain group. At the same time, there has been little researched on the indirect influence of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding through organizational factors.

As an employee's perception of the characteristics of the internal environment of the organization, the organizational atmosphere is the link between the employee and the organization. It will be changed by the behaviors of the members of the organization, and it will also have an impact on the working attitude and behavioral habits of the employees. Therefore, based on the perspective of Social Exchange Theory and Triadic Reciprocal Determinism, this study explores the relationship among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere and knowledge hiding, hoping to fill the gap in current research and empirical research on workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding, and make contributions to improving the research on the relationship between the two.

## 2. Objectives

At present, academic circles have studied the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding, but there is still a lack of intermediary studies on how workplace exclusion affects knowledge hiding. Therefore, this study takes Social Exchange Theory and Triadic Reciprocal Determinism as the theoretical basis and organizational atmosphere as the intermediary variable to explore and verify the relationship among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere and knowledge hiding. The main research contents are as follows:

- 1) To study the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding
- 2) To study the relationship between workplace exclusion and organizational atmosphere
- 3) To study the relationship between organizational atmosphere and knowledge hiding
- 4) To investigate the mediating effect of organizational atmosphere on the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1 Research Hypothesis

This study firstly adopts the literature research method, combines the existing research results, proposes the research hypothesis, and builds the theoretical model.

Blau (1964) believed that social exchange refers to the activity that occurs when other individuals can pay something back and stops when other individuals cannot. The reason why individuals are willing to engage in interpersonal communication with other individuals is that both exchange parties follow the social norms of equality and reciprocity. In the process of social exchange, if one party fails to reciprocate the other party, the one who does not get satisfactory returns will use negative or aggressive behavior to punish the one who violates the norms. Employees who are ostracized will think that the exchange relationship between them and others is not equal. Meanwhile, negative emotions such as anxiety and hatred brought by workplace exclusion negatively guide employees' perception of internal workplace environment information and bring more negative behaviors (Forgas & George, 2001; Wu, Yim, Kwan, & Zhang, 2012), in the face of exclusion, employees are more willing to return to negatively and harmful means, rather than reduce the loss of current profit through more rational means (Gouldner, 1960), and may consider the need to maintain superficial harmony in the working environment, Knowledge hiding happens to be negative behavior with strong concealment. Employees will take it as revenge for workplace exclusion, in the face of knowledge requests from others, they are more likely to retain and hide behaviors, to achieve psychological balance. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Workplace exclusion has a positive impact on employees' knowledge hiding.

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Organizational atmosphere refers to employees' perception of the characteristics of the organization's internal environment, including four dimensions: trust atmosphere, communication atmosphere, emotional atmosphere and fair atmosphere. As a way of interaction between the organizational system and organizational members, organizational atmosphere can effectively guide employees' behaviors (Duan, Wang, & Zhu, 2014). When employees feel excluded by others, they will have negative emotions and work attitudes (Ferris et al., 2008), which will negatively guide the behaviors of organization members. On the other hand, workplace exclusion will also restrict organization members' cognition of the surrounding environment (Chen, Zhen, & Zhang, 2022). Employees believe that workplace exclusion is an organizational feature that should be imitated and observed, which leads to the formation of mutually exclusive and negative interactive relationships among employees and reduces their willingness to cooperate with other members of the organization (Xu, Hu, & Guo, 2017). At the same time, it will be easier for employees to notice the deficiencies in the organizational environment, which will negatively affect employees' perception of the organizational atmosphere.

Workplace exclusion also makes it difficult to continue the frequent reciprocal social exchanges needed to generate trust within an organization. At the same time, employees have negative and hostile perceptions of others (DeWall, Twenge, Gitter, & Baumeister, 2009), thus destroying the atmosphere of trust in the organization. At the same time, workplace exclusion inhibits communication among organization members (Chen et al., 2022), making employees think that communication among organization members is difficult. On the other hand, employees who perceive that they are excluded from the workplace will have a large number of negative emotions and are more likely to conduct self-denial (Jia, 2014), which causes employees to have a negative cognition of the emotional atmosphere within the organization. Employees who are excluded from the workplace will also believe that the norms of equality and reciprocity that should be followed in social exchange have not been observed, and they may also believe that the organization has no effective means to punish those who are excluded (Jia, 2014), thus negatively affecting employees' perception of fair atmosphere. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Workplace exclusion has a negative impact on organizational atmosphere.

Employees' perception of organizational atmosphere will change their beliefs, values, attitudes and motivations (Amabile & Conti, 1999). A good organizational atmosphere will make employees in the organization have positive and pro-social behavioral motivations, and at the same time form positive demonstration and guidance for employees. Thus, knowledge hiding behavior of organization members can be reduced.

At the same time, the trust atmosphere in the organization lays a good foundation for the trust between individuals in the organization, and positively guides the working attitude of employees (Guinot, Chiva, & Roca-Puig, 2014), thus suppressing the negative behaviors in the organization and reducing the knowledge hiding behavior in the organization. A good communication atmosphere brings about the contact of colleagues, open exchange of information, cooperative interaction and positive knowledge transfer (Van Den Hooff & De Ridder, 2004). In order to match the observed environmental characteristics and norms, employees are more willing to impart their own knowledge rather than hide it. A positive team emotional atmosphere will convey enterprising and optimistic emotions to team members, promote mutual cooperation and communication among employees (Li, 2022), and enable employees to show more altruistic behaviors, thus inhibiting knowledge hiding behaviors. A fair atmosphere can reduce the risk perceived by employees and encourage both sides to reduce defensive behaviors (Gao, Wei, & Li, 2005), thus inhibiting knowledge hiding. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Organizational atmosphere has a negative impact on knowledge hiding.

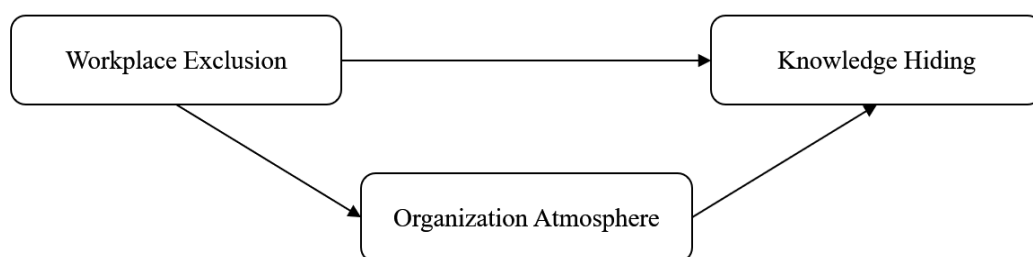
Workplace exclusion refers to the negative behavior perceived by employees of other organization members towards them, and the excluded will show lower willingness to cooperate with others (Xu et al., 2017). The reciprocating effect of negative interactions among organization members will cause continuous damage to the organizational atmosphere, and a poor organizational atmosphere will promote the negative reciprocal relationship among organization members. Interpersonal relationships within the organization



will be damaged, and interpersonal interaction between employees will affect how knowledge owners respond to knowledge requesters (He & Jiang, 2014). Therefore, under the influence of the negative organizational atmosphere, the organization cannot actively guide and demonstrate the staff, so that the employee should be more willing to take the method of shirking and hiding in the face of other people's knowledge requests. Therefore, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Organizational atmosphere plays a mediating role in the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding.

Based on the above inferences and assumptions, an intermediary model of workplace exclusions-organizational atmosphere-knowledge hiding can be established, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The mechanism model of Workplace Exclusion, Organization Atmosphere and Knowledge Hiding

Simultaneously, the different demographic variables of employees may affect the workplace exclusion, knowledge hiding and organizational atmosphere. Therefore, the gender and age of employees, working years in the current company, marital status, educational background, position category and industry can be collected for the difference analysis of variables.

### 3.2 Questionnaire design and data collection

After establishing the theoretical model, this study adopted the questionnaire method to obtain real and effective sample data.

The questionnaire designed for this study is divided into three parts. In the first part, the purpose, use, and time required for the questionnaire are briefly explained and introduced. Meanwhile, the anonymous confidentiality of the data is promised, and the respondents are thanked for their careful answers.

In the second part, the scales developed by Ferris et al. (2008), Wang, Lin, Chen, and Bai (2014) and Connelly, Zweig, Webster, and Trougakos (2012) are selected as the scales to measure workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere, and knowledge hiding. The three scales have been empirically tested by many scholars and have good reliability and validity. At the same time, the Likert scale of six levels is adopted, in which 1 means "strongly disagree" or "never happen", 6 means "strongly agree" or "always happen", and the occurrence frequency and degree of recognition from 1 to 6 are gradually increased.

In the third part, basic information about the respondents was collected as control variables, including gender, age, years of working in the current company, marital status, educational background, job category and industry of the respondents.

Finally, 443 questionnaires were sent out through online and offline collection, 429 questionnaires were recovered, 42 invalid questionnaires were eliminated, and 387 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 87.35%.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Finally, data analysis tools such as SPSS and Process were used to conduct descriptive statistical analysis of basic sample information and variables, the reliability of scale was verified by reliability test and validity test, and univariate ANOVA test and independent sample t-test were used to analyze the difference



of demographic variables and the correlation between pairwise variables. At the same time, the significance of direct and intermediate effects among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere, and knowledge hiding was tested by linear regression analysis to verify the validity of the research model.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Descriptive analysis

In all 387 valid questionnaires, the average value of workplace exclusion was 2.228, and the maximum value was 5, indicating that workplace exclusion in the survey sample did occur in the life of employees, but the probability of occurrence was small. The average value of organizational atmosphere was 4.697, and the minimum value was 2, which indicate that in most people's perception, the organizational atmosphere was good, but there were also a few organizational members who perceived the poor organizational atmosphere. The average value of knowledge hiding was 2.218, and the maximum value was 5.083, indicating that the probability of knowledge hiding in the organization was small, but there were also hidden knowledge. The standard deviation of the three measured variables was between 0.4 and 0.6, which had good stability.

##### 4.2 Reliability analysis

In the reliability analysis, there are ten items in the workplace exclusion scale, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.882, and the organizational atmosphere scale has 12 items in total, integrating Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is 0.909, in which Cronbach's trust atmosphere  $\alpha$  0.752, communication atmosphere 0.702, emotional atmosphere 0.728, and fair atmosphere 0.809. There are 12 items in the knowledge hiding scale, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.884. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  Both was higher than 0.8, and the deletion of any item would result in the decrease of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale. Therefore, it can be concluded that the items of the measurement scale have good consistency and high reliability.

In the validity analysis, the KMO value of workplace exclusion was 0.935, the correlation between items is strong, the Bartlett spherical test significance is less than 0.01, each item is relatively independent, in which the factor load of all items was greater than 0.63, and the extracted factors contained 49.161% of the information in the sample data. The KMO value of organizational atmosphere was 0.951, the Bartlett spherical test significance was 0.00, the factor load of all items was greater than 0.6, and the cumulative variance interpretation rate was 51.73%. The KMO value of knowledge hiding was 0.945, the significance of Bartlett's spherical test was less than 0.001, the factor load of all items was greater than 0.58, and the cumulative variance interpretation rate was 45.133%. Therefore, it was concluded that the measurement scale had good validity.

##### 4.3 Difference analysis

Through independent sample t-test and single-factor ANOVA test, seven basic information variables were analyzed. Finally, it was found that among some demographic variables, there were significant differences among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere, and knowledge hiding.

In the independent t-test of gender difference, the T value of workplace exclusion was 2.514, P was 0.012, less than 0.05, the mean value of males was 2.281, and the mean value of females was 2.162, which indicate that males were more sensitive to the perception of workplace exclusion. In the single-factor ANOVA analysis of age, the F value of organizational atmosphere was 3.687, and P was 0.006. Age was considered to affect employees' perception of organizational atmosphere. Employees aged 21~30 and 41~50 perceived slightly higher organizational atmosphere while employees aged 51 and above perceived slightly lower organizational atmosphere. The F value of knowledge hiding was 2.615, and P was 0.035, less than 0.05, indicating that different ages had an impact on employees' knowledge hiding, and employees aged over 51 were more likely to conduct knowledge hiding. In the independent t-test of marital status, the T value of organizational atmosphere was -2.250, P was 0.025, which was less than the 0.05 significance standard. The average of unmarried was 4.636, and the average of married was 4.759, indicating that married employees felt stronger organizational atmosphere.

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#### 4.4 Correlation analysis

As shown in Table 1, Pearson analysis shows that the correlation coefficient between workplace exclusion and organizational atmosphere was -0.461, with a significant negative correlation at the 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding was 0.577, which had a significant positive correlation at the 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient between organizational atmosphere and knowledge hiding was -0.622, which is significant at the 0.01 level and had a strong negative correlation. From this, there were significant correlation among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere, and knowledge hiding, which was suitable for regression analysis.

**Table 1** Correlation Analysis of Workplace Exclusion, Organization Atmosphere and Knowledge Hiding

Variable	Workplace Exclusion	Organization Atmosphere	Knowledge Hiding
Workplace Exclusion	1		
Organization Atmosphere	-0.461**	1	
Knowledge Hiding	0.577**	-0.622**	1

\*\*. At 0.01 level (double tail), the correlation was significant.

#### 4.5 Regression analysis

This study established four models to test the intermediary effect of organizational atmosphere through the test process proposed by Wen and Ye (2014), and the results are shown in Table 2.

In model 1, standardization  $\beta$  value was 0.577, and the F value was 192.058, with good significance, indicating that workplace exclusion has a significant positive impact on knowledge hiding. Adjustment  $R^2$  was 0.331, indicating that workplace exclusion explained 33.1% of the change in knowledge hiding. The D-W was 2.221, indicating that there was no data autocorrelation. Therefore, it was assumed that H1 had been confirmed.

Model 2, standardization  $\beta$  value was -0.461 and the F value was 103.739, indicating that workplace exclusion could have a significant negative impact on the organizational atmosphere. Adjustment  $R^2$  was 0.210, indicating that workplace exclusion explained 21% of the change in organizational atmosphere. Therefore, it was assumed that H2 had been confirmed.

In model 3, standardization  $\beta$  value was -0.622 and the F value was 242.724, which showed that organizational atmosphere had a significant negative effect on knowledge hiding. Adjustment  $R^2$  value was 0.385, indicating that organizational atmosphere explained 38.5% of the change in knowledge hiding. It was assumed that H3 had been confirmed.

**Table 2** Regression analysis of Workplace Exclusion, Organization Atmosphere and Knowledge Hiding

Variable	Model 1 Knowledge Hiding	Model 2 Organization Atmosphere	Model 3 Knowledge Hiding	Model 4 Knowledge Hiding	VIF
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	
Workplace Exclusion	0.577**	-0.461**		0.369**	1.269
Organization Atmosphere			-0.622**	-0.452**	1.269
$R^2$	0.333	0.212	0.387	0.494	
Adjusted $R^2$	0.331	0.210	0.385	0.491	
D-W	2.221	1.915	2.007	2.141	
F	192.058**	103.739**	242.724**	187.255**	

\*\*. At 0.01 level, the correlation was significant.

At the same time, this study also conducted a Bootstrap sampling test on the research model, and the results are shown in Table 3. According to model 4 and Table 3, the regression analysis was carried out

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with workplace exclusion and organizational atmosphere as independent variables. The VIF value of the independent variable was 1.269, and the impact of multiple collinearity problems was relatively low. The F value was 187.225, which standardized  $\beta$  values were 0.369 and -0.452 respectively, with good significance, and the adjusted  $R^2$  was 0.491, which indicated that both had an impact on knowledge hiding and could explain the 49.1% change of knowledge hiding. Among them, workplace exclusion standardization  $\beta$  value (0.369) was less than the standardization when the intermediary variable organization atmosphere was not added  $\beta$  Value (0.577), and the 95% confidence interval of Bootstrap test did not contain 0, indicating that organizational atmosphere played partial mediating role in the impact of workplace exclusion on knowledge hiding, assuming that H4 was confirmed.

**Table 3** Path analysis of Organization Atmosphere

Route	Effect	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Workplace Exclusion - Organization Atmosphere - Knowledge Hiding	0.189	0.063	0.074	0.315

Through the above data analysis, the validity of the intermediary model composed of workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere and knowledge hiding was tested the influence of some demographic variables on employees' cognition and behavior. All four hypotheses proposed in this study were confirmed, completing the preset study content.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Conclusion

Workplace exclusion can significantly and positively affect the knowledge hiding behavior of organizational members. The excluded members of the organization always think that they have a negative perception of other members of the organization and the surrounding environment, choose to use negative behavior in the subsequent social exchange to repay, and may retaliate by concealing and giving wrong information in the face of other members' knowledge requests or directly retaining knowledge.

Workplace exclusion can have a negative impact on the organizational atmosphere. Workplace exclusion can restrict the individual's perception of the surrounding environment, making employees recognize the negative characteristics and norms and use their negative attitudes and behaviors to treat other organizational members, destroy the interpersonal relationship with leaders and colleagues, and then have a negative perception of organization atmosphere.

Organizational atmosphere can inhibit the knowledge hiding behavior of organizational members. In a good organizational atmosphere, employees are more likely to generate altruistic motivation and are more willing to transfer knowledge by analyzing and understanding various information from the organizational environment. At the same time, a good organizational atmosphere has brought about mutual trust, efficient communication and exchange, positive and optimistic psychological state, and fair and just values, thus inhibiting knowledge hiding.

In the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding, organizational atmosphere plays partial intermediary role. Workplace exclusion makes the members of the organization show an unwilling attitude to cooperate, which increases the risks that employees feel during the exchange process. At the same time, it makes employees feel the environmental characteristics that do not promote communication in the organization. It also makes employees produce a lot of negative emotions, which has a negative impact on the surrounding environment. This will lead to more perfunctory work of employees, who can push or delay requests from others. They think that even if they pay a lot, they cannot get the corresponding return, which makes employees more willing to hide knowledge.



## 5.2 Recommendations for future research

First, this study only collected data in a time section. Only data in the current time period cannot explain the continuous dynamic impact of research variables. Future researchers can collect data from multiple cross sections at a certain time interval, take the first data as a control, and conduct a longitudinal comparative study to explain the dynamic relationship among workplace exclusion, organizational atmosphere, and knowledge hiding.

Secondly, this study investigated the relationship between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding through only one variable of organizational atmosphere, but there are still many potential paths between workplace exclusion and knowledge hiding that have not been studied. In the future, different intermediary variables can be selected to further clarify how workplace exclusion affects knowledge hiding.

Finally, the intermediary variable organizational atmosphere selected in this study was defined from a subjective perspective, and the division methods of trust atmosphere, communication atmosphere, emotional atmosphere, and fair atmosphere were adopted. However, the definition of organizational atmosphere in the current academic community is still controversial. Future researchers can select organizational atmosphere divided by different dimensions for verification or use organizational atmosphere objectively defined for research to verify the effectiveness of organizational atmosphere in this model.

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