

2003-09

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MCIL Publishing, Oxford University

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# The impact of interpersonal trust and power on the attributes of knowledge acquisition: What is their predictive power?

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**Abstract:** Little is known on the combined effect of interpersonal trust and power factors on the traits and skills of knowledge acquisition. A survey of 140 first line managers was conducted to investigate the relationship between power, interpersonal trust and knowledge acquisition. The results showed that the interpersonal trust measures were not predictive of knowledge acquisition attributes compared to those of the power dimensions. It was also found that the dimensions of power provided statistically significant additional predictive power, after having statistically controlled for the predictive effects of interpersonal trust.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal trust ♦ knowledge acquisition ♦ power.

## 1. Introduction

For several years now, researchers and practitioners have been extolling the virtues of knowledge management and its role in organisational success through sustainable competitive advantage (Drucker, 1997). The emerging recognition of knowledge and intellectual capital has laid the groundwork for new, knowledge-based concepts, theories and practices of management (Roos & Von Krogh, 1996). As a result, the new model of knowledge management is about sharing the individual and collective brain power of people (knowledge), which cannot be harnessed in the absence of trust and cooperation, help and care, shared values and vision, sincerity and goodwill (Rastogi, 2000). Professor John Kotter told the Australian Institute of Management that "if people don't trust the information they are getting from you they won't necessarily act on it; they won't pass it on as if it is credible, and that's a killer" (Kotter, 2003:1).

In relation to trust, recent research (Politis, 2002) has shown that most of the interpersonal trust dimensions are positively related to the variables of knowledge acquisition. It is also acknowledged that power is often employed by management to influence the behaviour of employees (Fairholm, 1993). Although in a recent study Politis (2003) reported that most of the dimensions of power associated with French and Ravens' (1959) power-based taxonomy enable followers' knowledge acquisition, current research lacks the empirical evidence supporting the prediction of the knowledge acquisition attributes from the combine effect of interpersonal trust and power factors. To this end, this research started by asking the following questions. Is the influence of managerial power more important than the influence of interpersonal trust in the process of knowledge acquisition? Are the correlations derived from the factors of interpersonal trust and knowledge acquisition stronger, and more positive, than those with the power factors? Will the statistical prediction of the knowledge acquisition attributes be increased with the addition of power factors in the set of the predictor variables?

The answers to these questions are some of the objectives of this paper. The research reported in this study investigates the relationship between the dimensions of interpersonal trust, the dimensions of power and knowledge acquisition attributes. The study involves a questionnaire-based survey of first line managers from organisations operating in the United Arab Emirates.

## 2. Power and knowledge acquisition

In his book *PowerShift*, Toffler (1990) made it clear that knowledge has become the global competitive driver. "Knowledge, as Francis Bacon advised us, is power" ([www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/q100764.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/q100764.html)), and where power resides, resides success. This quote of course refers to 'expert power', but in the literature there are a number of power dimensions that are being exercised by management to produce intended and effective

results (Fairholm, 1993). Kanter (1979: 66) argues that power is fundamentally "the ability to mobilise resources (human and machine) to get things done".

It is thus, implied that power is positive in terms of its output. According to Kipnis and Schmidt (1988), favourable performance gain ratings are largely affected by the manager's effective use of influence behaviour (power). In this context, power is defined as the ability of management to influence the behaviour, intentions, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and the values of subordinates (French & Raven 1959). Over the years a number of power sources have been presented by Stephenson (1985), Hunt (1986), and Morgan (1986), with French and Raven (1959) being the authors most heavily utilised. French and Raven's power-based taxonomy consists of five important bases of power: *coercive*, *expert*, *legitimate*, *referent*, and *reward*. *Coercive power* is based on the target's belief that the manager has the ability to punish employees; *expert power* is based on the target's belief that the manager can provide him or her with special knowledge; *legitimate power* is based on the target's perception that the manager has the legitimate right to influence the target and that he or she is obligated to comply; *referent power* is based on the target's identification with or desire to be associated with the manager; and *reward power* is based on the target's belief that the manager has the ability to provide him or her with desired tangible or intangible objectives.

The above bases of power are often employed by management to influence the behaviour of organisational life (Fairholm, 1993). Yet, it is widely acknowledged that power is being the pervasive part of the fabric of organisational life (Mangham, 1988). Moreover, Politis (2003) found that a number of power dimensions are positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes of knowledge workers. It is thus, reasonable to assume that the factors representing power will be the predictive variables of knowledge acquisition. The assumed connectedness between power and knowledge acquisition is expressed in the following propositions:

*Proposition 1a:* Coercive power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 1b:* Expert power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 1c:* Legitimate power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 1d:* Referent power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 1e:* Reward power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

### 3. Interpersonal trust and knowledge acquisition

Knowledge is usually classified as either explicit or tacit (Nonaka, 1998). Explicit knowledge is described as formal, systematic knowledge that can be expressed or communicated without vagueness or ambiguity. It can be stored in books, manuals, and databases. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is considered as highly personal know-how that is derived from experience and beliefs and usually hard to articulate and communicate.

On the other hand, knowledge management (acquisition) has been defined in many different ways. However, the most common description of knowledge acquisition in business practices is connected with "acquiring information directly from domain experts" (Mykytyn, Mykytyn & Raja, 1994: 98). Mykytyn and colleagues revealed 26 behavioural skills and traits (attributes) that are essential for knowledge acquisition. These attributes are presumed to produce six factors: *communication/problem understanding*, *personal traits*, *control*, *organisation*, *negotiation* and *liberal arts/non-verbal communication*.

It is being argued that knowledge management (KM) is the combination of human resource management and information management, and thus relates to all processes that are combined with the identification, acquisition, creation, distribution and use of both information and knowledge (Livonen & Huotari, 2000). Therefore, human factors are essential components for effective *knowledge acquisition* and must be taken into account. But, trust belongs to the area of human factors in KM. While it has not been extensively discussed, it has been suggested that trust is required for knowledge generation and knowledge sharing (Probst, Raub & Romhardt, 2000; Kotter, 2003). In other words, the employees must trust each other to share their information and knowledge (Connelly & Kelloway, 2000).

Moreover, the promotion of relational trust is illustrated through the recommendation to create communities of practice for knowledge generation and sharing (von Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka, 2000). Communities of practice are groups in which the social cohesiveness has been promoted, and the groups assist on the generation of new knowledge (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). The promotion of social ties within these groups is related to the development of knowledge-based, identification-based and relational trust. With respect to relational trust, Cook and Wall (1980) have distinguished two components of dyadic or *interpersonal trust*: *faith* and *confidence*. Interpersonal trust is been viewed as *faith* and *confidence* in *peers* (that is, co-worker trust), as well as, as *faith* and *confidence* in *management* (that is, trust in both the supervisor and top management). The definitions of faith and confidence have been adopted from Cook and Wall (1980: 40).

- Trust refers to the “faith in the trustworthy intentions of others”.
- Trust refers to the “confidence in the ability of others, yielding ascriptions of capability and reliability”.

Empirical evidence has shown that collaborative problem solving in organisations presupposes interpersonal trust (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Politis, 2002), and specifically co-worker trust. Moreover, Probst et al. (2000) suggest that trust is required within the knowledge market as it is difficult to assess the value of the knowledge being acquired. Furthermore, Ford (2001) argued that acquisition of knowledge from an individual outside the organisation cannot benefit from organisational trust, as the individual is not part of the organisation. Yet, impersonal trust would not be effective as the trust is directed to the position within the organisation; therefore, “interpersonal trust is the best type of trust for knowledge acquisition” (p. 14). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the factors of interpersonal trust will be the predictive variables of knowledge acquisition attributes. The assumed connectedness between interpersonal trust and knowledge acquisition is expressed in the following propositions.

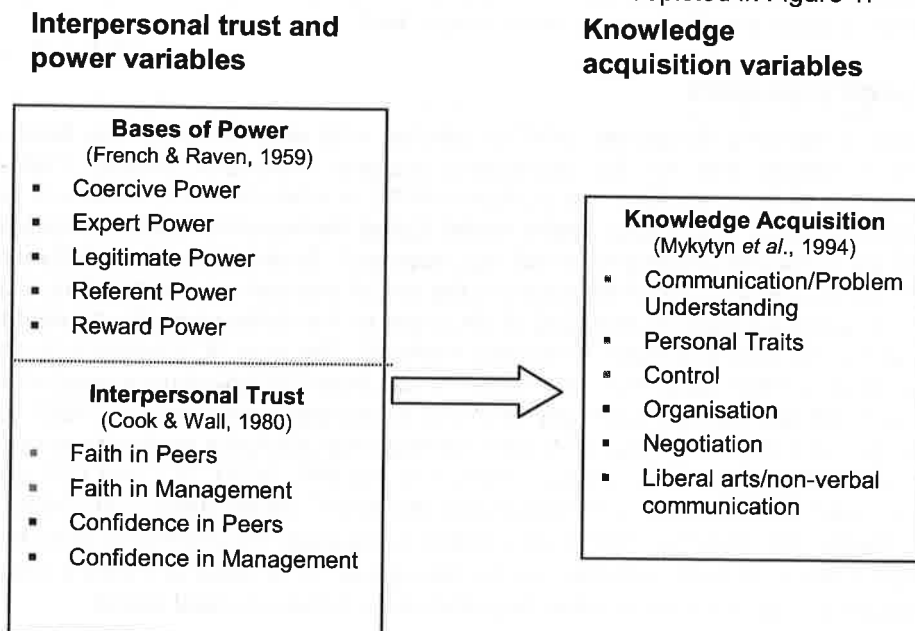
*Proposition 2a:* Faith in peers will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 2b:* Faith in management will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 2c:* Confidence in peers will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

*Proposition 2d:* Confidence in management will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes.

The nine propositions are summarised in the research model depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Summary of variables used in the paper

Moreover, in a recent study Politis (2001) found strong positive relationships between various leadership style dimensions and knowledge acquisition attributes. Yet, performance is largely affected by leadership's effective use of power (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). It is thus, reasonable to predict that the dimensions of power would provide an increase in the level of prediction of knowledge acquisition, after being statistically controlled for the predictive effects of interpersonal trust. Proposition 3 expresses this prediction.

*Proposition 3:* The statistical prediction of the knowledge acquisition factors from the interpersonal trust variables will be increased with the addition of power factors in the set of interpersonal trust predictor factors.

## **4. Sample and procedures**

### **4.1 Sample**

The sample was selected from service (telecommunications and banking) and manufacturing organisations operating in the United Arab Emirates. Discussions with both management and employees suggested that the selected organisations were relatively flat with maximum six levels of hierarchy. First line managers/supervisors who were engaged in selling services, servicing customers and manufacturing operations participated in the study. One hundred and nineteen first line managers (82.5 percent response rate) provided the data. Twenty one first line managers returned incomplete questionnaires which were excluded from the final sample of 119. The sample consisted of 100% males. Approximately two-quarters of participants had attained a college diploma or degree qualifications and almost one-half had received technical college qualifications.

### **4.2 Procedures**

Survey questionnaires were pre-tested, using small number of respondents (about one dozen; the pre-test participants did not participate in the final data collection). As a consequence of the pre-testing, relatively minor modifications were made in the written instructions and in several of the demographic items. The revised survey, written in English, was then administered to the organisational respondents in a classroom environment. Written instructions, along with brief oral presentations, were given to assure the respondents of anonymity protection and to explain (in broad terms) the purpose of the research. The participants were all given the opportunity to ask questions and were encouraged to answer the survey honestly; anonymity was guaranteed and no names or other identifying information was asked.

### **4.3 Analytical procedure**

The Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS, version 4.0) was used for the factor analysis (measurement model) and for the regression analysis (structural model). Following the recommendations of Sommer, Bae and Luthans (1995), a measurement model was developed and then, with this held, a structural (path) model. Using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) the factorial validity of the measurement model was assessed. Given adequate validity coefficients of those measures, the number of indicators in the model was reduced by creating a composite scale for each latent variable (Politis, 2001). As a test of the measurement and path models a mixture of fit-indices was employed to assess model fit. The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom ( $\chi^2/df$ ) has been computed, with ratios of less than 2.0 indicating a good fit. However, since absolute indices can be adversely affected by sample size (Loehlin, 1992), four other relative indices (GFI, AGFI, TLI, and CFI) were computed to provide a more robust evaluation of model fit (Tucker & Lewis, 1973; Tanaka, 1987). For the GFI, AGFI, TLI, and CFI, coefficients closer to unity indicate a good fit, with acceptable levels of fit being above 0.90 (Marsh, Balla & McDonald, 1988). The analytical procedure (steps), to calculate the regression coefficient  $\lambda_i$  and measurement error  $\theta_i$  of each variable used in this paper, is detailed in Politis's (2001) study. The parameters of  $\lambda_i$  and  $\theta_i$  were used as fix parameters in the structural model.

## 5. Measurement models

### 5.1 Power variables

For this research, power was assessed by using French and Raven's (1959) power-based taxonomy. We measured French and Raven's (1959) bases of power using a modified version of Hinkin and Schriesheim's (1989) 20-item power scale, as adapted by Nesler, Aguinis, Quigley and Tedeschi (1993). The scale employs a nine-point response scale (1 = disagree; 9 = agree), and consists of five subscales: coercive power, expert power, legitimate power, referent power, and reward power. Based on the results of a CFA supporting five power factors, these items were used to create five composite scales: coercive power (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.71$ ); expert power (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ); legitimate power (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ); referent power (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.89$ ); and reward power (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ). Two items were dropped due to cross loading; these being of the order of, or less than, 0.16.

### 5.2 Interpersonal trust variables

Interpersonal trust measures were assessed by using Cook and Wall's (1980) 12-item scale. The scale employs a seven-point response scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), and consists of four subscales: faith in peers, faith in management, confidence in peers, and confidence in management. Based on the results of a CFA supporting three factors, these items were used to create three scales: faith in peers (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ), confidence in peers (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), and confidence in management (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.69$ ). One item was dropped due to cross loading; this being of the order of, or less than, 0.15.

### 5.3 Knowledge acquisition variables

Knowledge acquisition variables (behavioural skills and traits of knowledge workers) were assessed by using Mykytyn, et al.'s (1994) 26-item scale. The scale employs a seven-point response scale (1 = very unqualified; 7 = very qualified), and consists of six subscales: communication/problem understanding, personal traits, control, organization, negotiation, and liberal arts/nonverbal communication. Based on the results of the CFA four factors were supported: communication (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.74$ ), personal traits/control (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.77$ ), problem understanding (5 items,  $\alpha = 0.82$ ), and organisation (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.70$ ). Three items were dropped due to cross loading; these being of the order of, or less than, 0.11.

## 6. Path modelling

Using the analytical procedure outlined in Politis's (2001: 358-359) study, the parameters in the path model (i.e.  $\lambda_i$  and  $\theta_i$ ) we calculated. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, reliability estimates, and  $\lambda_i$  and  $\theta_i$  estimates for the analysis.

Once these parameters—regression coefficients ( $\lambda_i$ ), and the measurement error variances ( $\theta_i$ )—were calculated, this information was fed into the path model to examine the relationships among the latent variables. The model of Figure 2 contains the five dimensions of power, the three interpersonal trust dimensions and the four knowledge acquisition variables.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and  $\lambda_i$  and  $\theta_i$  estimates

Composite Variables	Mean	SD ( $\sigma$ )	Reliability Estimate $\alpha$	Loading $\lambda = \sigma \sqrt{\alpha}$	Error Variance $\theta = \sigma^2 (1 - \alpha)$
<b>Bases of Power</b>					
Coercive power	6.52	2.27	.71	1.91	1.49
Expert power	5.68	1.84	.76	1.60	.812
Legitimate power	6.79	1.42	.81	1.38	.444
Referent power	6.67	2.01	.89	1.89	.440
Reward power	6.09	2.26	.77	1.98	1.17
<b>Interpersonal trust variables</b>					
Faith in peers	5.59	1.09	.82	0.99	.214
Confidence in peers	5.79	1.09	.79	1.05	.292
Confidence in management	4.79	1.51	.69	1.25	.707
<b>Knowledge acquisition variables</b>					
Communication	5.37	0.83	.74	0.71	.179
Personal traits/Control	5.27	0.92	.77	0.81	.195
Problem understanding	5.39	0.98	.82	0.89	.173
Organisation	5.43	0.74	.70	0.62	.164

N = 119

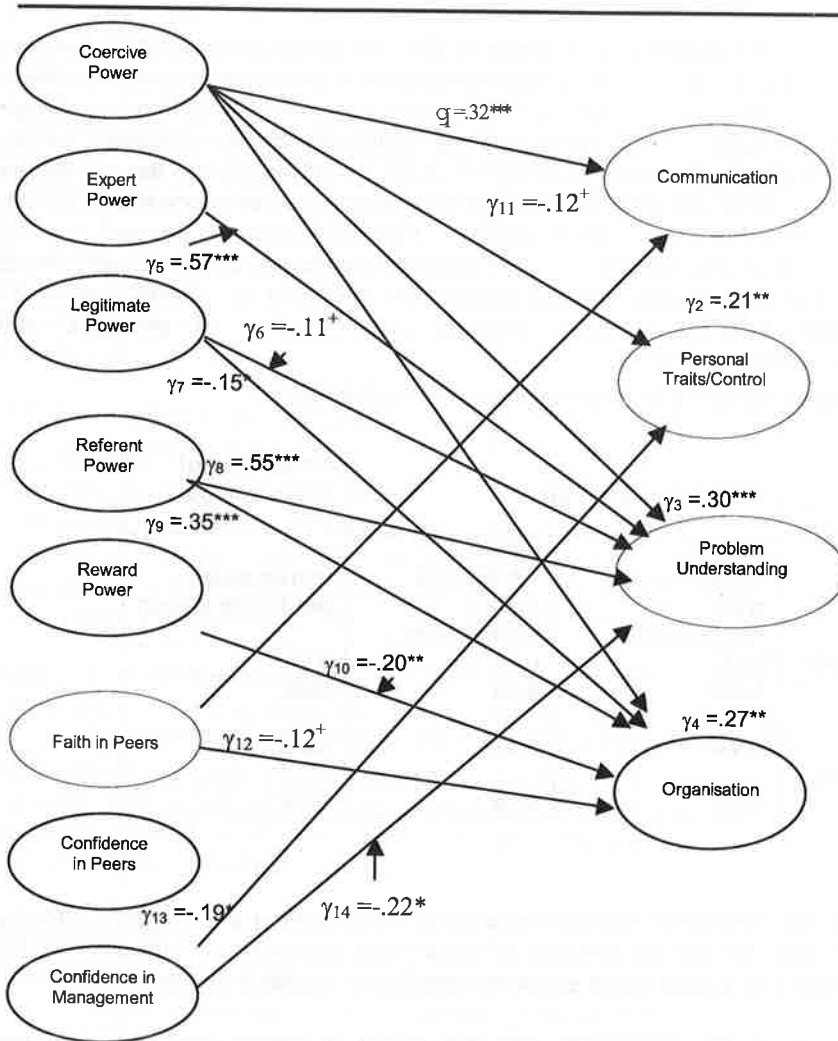
The analysis revealed that the structural model of Figure 2 fit the data fairly well, with  $\chi^2 = 69.6$ ;  $df = 24$ ; ( $\chi^2/df = 2.90$ ); GFI = 0.90; AGFI = 0.88; TLI = 0.86; CFI = 0.89; RMR = 0.106; and RMSEA = 0.083. Alternative models were examined with either paths added, reversed or removed, but none improved the fit.

### 6.1 Hypotheses testing

Figure 2 displays results of the best fit structural equations model. As predicted by proposition 1a (*P1a*), there were significant positive relationships between coercive power and knowledge acquisition attributes. *Coercive power* was strongly and positively related to *communication* ( $\gamma_1 = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), *personal traits/control* ( $\gamma_2 = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), *problem understanding* ( $\gamma_3 = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and *organisation* ( $\gamma_4 = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting *P1a*.

Proposition 1b (*P1b*) predicted that expert power will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes. The standardised path coefficient between *expert power* and *problem understanding* was strong and significant ( $\gamma_5 = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), marginally supporting *P1b*. The expected relationship between expert power and the other dimensions of knowledge acquisition, viz. communication, personal traits/control, and organisations, was not supported. Contrary to proposition 1c (*P1c*), legitimate power was negatively related to problem understanding ( $\gamma_6 = -0.11$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), and organisation ( $\gamma_7 = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), while the results showed no other relationship between legitimate power and communication or personal traits/control.

As predicted by proposition 1d (*P1d*), there were significant positive relationships between referent power and two dimensions of knowledge acquisition. Specifically, *referent power* was strongly and positively related to *problem understanding* ( $\gamma_8 = 0.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and *organisation* ( $\gamma_9 = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The expected relationship between referent power, communication and personal traits/control was not supported. Finally, the relationship between reward power and organisation was in the wrong direction ( $\gamma_{10} = -0.20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), not supporting predictions. No paths were significant between reward power and the other knowledge acquisition attributes, not supporting proposition 1e (*P1e*).

Bases of power and  
interpersonal trustKnowledge acquisition  
attributes

**Figure 2:** Structural estimates of the hypothesised model  <sup>$\alpha$</sup>

Note:  <sup>$\alpha$</sup>  Standardised path coefficients,

N = 119

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$

<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$

All correlations of predictor variables were statistical significant at 0.01 level

In relation to interpersonal trust-knowledge acquisition relationship, the findings are not consistent with predictions. Specifically, the results showed that *faith in peers* was negatively related to *communication* ( $\gamma_{11} = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ) and *organisation* ( $\gamma_{12} = -0.12$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), not supporting prediction 2a (P2a). Proposition 2b was not tested, because faith in management was not supported by the CFA. Moreover, proposition 2c (P2c) predicted that confidence in peers will be positively related to knowledge acquisition attributes. This prediction was not supported (see Figure 2), in that no paths were significant between *confidence in peers* and the factors of knowledge acquisition. Finally, proposition 2d (P2d) predicted a positive and significant relationship between confidence in management and knowledge acquisition. Contrary to prediction, the relationships between *confidence in management* and both *personal traits/control* and *problem understanding*, were in the wrong direction ( $\gamma_{13} = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and



$\gamma_{14} = -0.22, p < 0.05$ , respectively), not supporting *P2d*. No other paths were significant between confidence in management and the dimensions of knowledge acquisition.

The structural equations results supported proposition 3 (*P3*) for all dimensions of knowledge acquisition attributes (see Table 2). As expected, the dimensions of power measured by Nesler et al. (1993) scale provided small but statistical significant incremental validity for the knowledge acquisition attributes. For example, it was found that the coefficient of determination for the structural equations for communication was 0.39 ( $R^2 = 0.39$ ). In other words, the combined effect of the five power dimensions and the dimension of interpersonal trust (predictor variables) explains 39 per cent of the variation in communication. The remaining 61 percent are not explained. As shown in Table 2, the results revealed that the measures of power provided a small but statistically incremental validity for the dependent variables of communication (9 percent), personal traits/control (2 percent), problem understanding (4 percent), and organisation (10 percent), supporting *P3*.

**Table 2:** Coefficient of determination of knowledge acquisition attributes

	Dependent Variables		Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ )
	With interpersonal trust dimensions	With the addition of power dimensions	Incremental predictive power
Communication	0.30	0.39	0.09
Personal Traits/Control	0.04	0.06	0.02
Problem Understanding	0.04	0.08	0.04
Organization	0.19	0.29	0.10

## 7. Discussion

The aim of this study was to extend the field of research by investigating the combine effect of power and interpersonal trust on the dimensions of knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, the predictive power of the factors of power in the set of the predictor variables was examined.

To a large extent the results are consistent with the realm of power and organisational performance literature, in that managerial power is necessary to produce effective results (Fairholm, 1993), and to increase performance output (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). The findings are also consistent to those of previous studies in which Politis (2003) found that some power dimensions are positively related to knowledge acquisition. Specifically, the results showed that coercive power, referent power, and expert power are important determinants of communication, personal traits/control, problem understanding, and organisation (i.e. knowledge acquisition attributes).

Moreover, the findings are not consistent with the literature of trust and knowledge management. The study failed to identify strong relationships between the dimensions of interpersonal trust and knowledge acquisition attributes, not supporting previous empirical findings. It is implied in these results that organisations may acquire and share knowledge via technology and through individuals who never develop strong interpersonal relationships, thus interpersonal trust (Ford, 2001). These organisations may run into a risk of developing a culture whereby employees through words, actions, or decisions, act 'opportunistically' (Robbins, 2001), in a way that individuals are steeped as being strongly antagonistic to knowledge sharing. This type of culture raises the concern of emebdedness, that is, the type of behaviour embedded in structures of social relations (Granovetter, 1985). This should be examined through a series of field studies or experimental studies.

Finally, it was found that the dimensions of managerial power provided statistically significant additional predictive power, after having statistically controlled for the predictive effects of interpersonal trust dimensions. This implies that managers in countries with high power distance (i.e. approximately 82 out of 110 points in Hofstede's (1991) Power Distance Index) are more likely to be paternalistic towards employees, thereby, facilitating their skills and traits for knowledge acquisition. An issue that has been raised by this paper is that it may be possible for cultures with high power distance (i.e. Arab, Far Eastern and Latin countries) to do some, if not all the knowledge processes without interpersonal trust (i.e. solely through organisational trust and managerial power); an argument supported by Ford (2001).

In conclusion, managers can exercise power through their position and rewards, but cannot force interpersonal trust to occur. They can actively encourage and facilitate however, knowledge sharing environment, and discourage industrial age thinking and opportunistic behaviours.

### 7.1 Limitations and future work

The present study limited its focus to a key set of power, trust and knowledge acquisition variables. Although the variables of interpersonal trust and power used in this study were considered important in facilitating a knowledge-sharing culture, future research models should examine the relationship of knowledge acquisition to other factors, such as task complexity, organisational trust (Ford, 2001), culture and leadership (Davenport, DeLong & Breers, 1998), and organisational and social networks (Lincoln & Miller, 1979; Granovetter, 1985).

Although from the analytical perspective structural equations modelling has a number of advantages in testing statistical causal relationships, actual causality cannot be tested directly. So ideally future research must test causality using experimental or longitudinal data for more define results. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study renders it vulnerable to problems typically associated with survey research (common method variance). To account for the common method variance problems, it would have been advantageous for future researchers to gather data from multiple sources.

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