



LUND UNIVERSITY  
School of Economics and Management

# **They, Us & Myself - We Become Better and Everything Goes Better**

A Study About Professionals' Willingness to Share Knowledge  
in Professional Service Firms

by

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May 2018

Degree Project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

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## **Abstract**

Knowledge sharing is a key element in professional service firms (PSFs), as it is the knowledge that ultimately constitutes the core of their business. However, knowledge sharing is mainly voluntary and cannot be detached from the professionals engaging in it. Thus, it appears pertinent to appreciate professionals' perspective and perception of knowledge sharing, as well as to understand their willingness to share knowledge. For this purpose, we choose to research lawyers as a classical example of professionals. Through a hermeneutic approach, we further put the willingness to share knowledge into its wider context. We explore the interdependencies between the lawyers' power within the firm, their identification with profession and organisation and, ultimately, how these concepts facilitate understanding the willingness to share knowledge. Our research portrays how the lawyers identify strongly with their profession, but even more strongly with the organisation they work for. In combination, these two identifications induce professionals' willingness to share knowledge. Moreover, due to their strong organisational identification, lawyers' understanding of knowledge as a source of power does not inhibit their willingness to share knowledge. By contrast, power increases when knowledge becomes visible through sharing, and thus augments professionals' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing.

**Keywords:** Identification, Knowledge Sharing, Power, Professionals, Professional Service Firm, Willingness

## **Acknowledgements**

We want to thank all of you who helped us to get this degree project done.

Without you, it would not have been the same.

Thank you to all the interviewees for their time and the knowledge they shared with us.

Our special thanks go to Anna, Christina, Thomas, Øystein, Barbora and Elżbieta.

Last but not least, we thank each other for all the efforts and great fun we had during these months of thesis writing!

Lisa & Agnè

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## 1. Introduction

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“The knowledge and our personnel together are what we have. We have nothing else. Nice furniture, yes. But you can’t make a living out of having a nice office and furniture.” (Jonas)

“That is the only thing that we actually have of value in this. Perhaps some chairs, but apart from the furniture, it’s knowledge. And relations.” (Marius)

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### 1.1. Background

Knowledge is the key resource - both input and output - in knowledge-intensive organisations (Newell et al., 2009), where the ‘product to be sold’ is not tangible but consists of expertise and knowledge (Alvesson, 2004). Professional service firms (PSFs), as one group of knowledge-intensive organisations (Alvesson, 2004), are characterised not only by their knowledge-intensiveness, but also by a professionalised workforce (Nordenflycht, 2010) and the aim to provide top quality service to their clients (Maister, 2003). Consequently, knowledge sharing - individual workers providing and receiving knowledge (Kalling & Styhre, 2003) - is of particular significance in PSFs. Knowledge sharing constitutes a part of knowledge management, whereby the latter can be defined as explicit strategies, tools and practices applied by management that seek to make use of knowledge in the organisation (Newell et al., 2009). However, knowledge sharing is voluntary (Newell et al., 2009; Wang & Noe, 2010), cannot be fully enforced on individuals (Kärreman, 2010; Newell et al., 2009) and generally occurs independent from requests, even though individuals may opt to share knowledge when demanded by others (Tangaraja et al., 2016).

Knowledge sharing has become a topic of major interest, from both scholars’ and practitioners’ view (Jonsson, 2015; Reinholt et al., 2011). Much focus in research has been on how organisations and management can enhance the sharing of knowledge - their key resource - through environmental factors, such as the organisational context and structure, team characteristics, or culture (Wang & Noe, 2010). Less emphasis though appears to be on the individual workers’ perception of these efforts to enhance knowledge sharing, and understanding their willingness, or possibly unwillingness, to share knowledge. In other words, existing research focuses less on the individual perspective of the worker, but rather analyses knowledge sharing from the organisational point of view. Moreover, the notions of knowledge-intensiveness and expertise induce knowledge workers to develop strong professional identities (Alvesson, 2004; Styhre, 2011), and the profession represents an

important target for identification besides the organisation (Alvesson, 2004; Atewologun et al., 2017; Vough, 2012). This association with having unique expertise, likewise, gives knowledge workers elevated power within the firm (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015), thus potentially affecting their knowledge sharing behaviour. Ultimately, individuals' inclination to provide others with their knowledge cannot be separated from incentives or motivation (Kalling & Styhre, 2003).

For our research, we choose to study lawyers which, based on their specialised knowledge, formal credentials and admittance barriers to the profession, constitute a classical example of professionals (Styhre, 2011). The two law firms at which we conduct our study - Lolaf & Partners (local law firm) and Ilaf & Partners (international law firm) - are both based in Sweden. Even though the latter constitutes part of an international firm, the particular Sweden-based office is of similar size to the offices of Lolaf & Partners, in terms of the number of lawyers working there. Both law firms are organised as true partnerships, where each partner owns a part of the business, and both profits and liabilities of the firm are equally shared among them (Empson, 2007).

## **1.2. Problematisation**

Among scholars, it is widely acknowledged that an organisational structure and culture may support and facilitate - or in contrast hinder - knowledge sharing, and thus play an important role (Alvesson 2004; Jonsson, 2015; Newell et al, 2009; Robertson & Hammersley, 2000). Likewise, the organisational context - how different parts of the organisation are involved in the knowledge sharing - as well as cognitive factors that determine the quality of knowledge sharing and are influenced by social and cultural norms in the organisation, impact knowledge sharing practices (Kalling & Styhre, 2003). However, for the knowledge sharing to take place, it is equally important that individuals are open and willing to share and receive knowledge (Jonsson, 2015). In this line, Gao and Riley (2010) further distinguish between the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing processes in general, and the willingness to reveal and provide one's own expert professional knowledge, whereby the latter is not necessarily implied when participating in knowledge sharing activities. Altogether, knowledge sharing is voluntary behaviour, which cannot be fully reinforced by organisational routines (Newell et al., 2009).

Individuals' perception of knowledge and their perspective towards knowledge sharing, consequently, constitute an essential part of the knowledge sharing process and therefore are

important to comprehend. However, while a variety of disciplines contribute to individual-level knowledge sharing research, only a small number of empirical studies have investigated more specific factors, for instance, perceptions of relationships between knowledge and power (Gordon & Grant, 2005; Wang & Noe, 2010). This individual perspective is potentially influenced by knowledge workers' distinct characteristics, such as operational autonomy and a pronounced professional identity (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2009).

Firstly, knowledge workers have a higher degree of autonomy in their work compared to other types of workers. The level of control that knowledge-intensive firms' management can exercise over knowledge workers' work is limited due to the specific knowledge and skills of knowledge workers, that management may lack (Newell et al., 2009). Thus, the shift of balance in the organisational hierarchy towards a horizontal division of labour in the knowledge-intensive context leads to a view of power as knowledge workers' capacity to influence (Kärreman, 2010). This alternative view is different from the traditional one, that understands power as a force to make someone behave in a way they otherwise would choose not to (Gordon & Grant, 2005). Moreover, in their review on knowledge sharing, Wang and Noe (2010) point to the potential and necessity of researching how knowledge sharing behaviour is affected when employees see knowledge as an origin of power, expertise and recognition. In this context, the authors refer to the individual's fear of a loss thereof, thus inducing unwillingness to share knowledge, but, on the other hand, also to how this power, expertise and recognition is only gained through engaging in knowledge sharing. A consideration of this complex relationship between knowledge and power, thus, potentially provides a deeper understanding of professionals' perception of and willingness to share knowledge.

Secondly, in a knowledge-intensive context, knowledge workers, and professionals in particular, tend to develop a specific professional identity, due to the esteem perceived for their expertise and knowledge, their education, and certain admittance mechanisms to the profession (Alvesson, 2004; Styhre, 2011). In the case of lawyers, for instance, the learning of the profession continues when joining a law firm and learning to "act in a professional manner", as well as getting to know the specific firm (Jonsson, 2013, p.71). At the same time, junior lawyers are pursuing admittance to the professional association - the Bar Association - which not only applies certain norms and regulations on the profession, but also makes the knowledge more profession-specific (Jonsson, 2013; Morris & Empson, 1998; Nordenflycht, 2010). Further, even though knowledge workers are suggested to strongly identify with the profession (Alvesson, 2004), this professional identification coexists with the organisational



identification (Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017). Moreover, identity influences people's "logics of action" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1163) and identifying with a specific target fosters behaviour that favours this target of identification (Van Knippenberg, 2000). Since knowledge constitutes a highly valuable asset of the organisation (Davenport & Prusak, 1998), individuals' willingness to share their knowledge can be viewed as the manifestation of a positive attitude towards the organisation. A consideration of individuals' identification with their profession or the organisation they work for, thus, appears very central to understand their willingness to share knowledge.

Discussing the willingness to share knowledge in organisations, Kalling and Styhre (2003) clearly differentiate between the provision and reception of knowledge through knowledge sharing, despite both being interdependent. On the one hand, these authors acknowledge how receiving knowledge shared by others may not always occur seamlessly, for instance, due to lacking trust. In the same line, McGregor (2006) refers to an unwillingness to learn, or the individuals' neglect of a need thereof, as hindering the reception of knowledge. On the other hand, though, Kalling and Styhre (2003) also refer to how it is transferring one's own knowledge that may appear less desired than expanding one's knowledge base by receiving new knowledge. Moreover, the authors suggest that the provision of knowledge cannot be fully detached from incentives or motivation. By contrast, Jonsson (2013), specifically researching a law firm as a PSF, concludes how retaining one's knowledge does not appear advantageous to these professionals. Instead, she argues, the perception of gaining through giving, in terms of personal learning when sharing knowledge in the firm, induces the willingness to provide knowledge to others. Consequently, given these divergent notions, it appears that individuals' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing - especially in terms of providing others with their knowledge - requires a closer consideration in our research.

Further insights into professionals' willingness to share knowledge can thus be obtained by combining existing research on both power and identification with research on knowledge sharing as well as with motivational factors, thereby crossing the bridge between seldom jointly investigated areas (Wang & Noe, 2010). Consequently, aiming for a meaningful contribution to existing research, we choose aforementioned theoretical concepts - underlying motivational factors, power and identification within the work context - to research professionals' willingness to share their knowledge. As previously elaborated, the willingness to provide others with one's own knowledge seems to be more problematic than the willingness to receive knowledge (Gao & Riley, 2010; Kalling & Styhre, 2003). In our study, we therefore focus on knowledge provision as one side of the process of knowledge sharing.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

With the present study, we aim to contribute to the existing PSF research and the literature on knowledge sharing, with a deeper understanding of professionals' perspective and perception of knowledge sharing, as well as their willingness to share knowledge in PSFs. Knowledge workers' status in relation to knowledge as the organisations' most valuable resource (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Newell et al., 2009) gives them elevated power and influence within the organisation (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman, 2010), which in turn may affect their knowledge sharing behaviour. Further, the coexistence between organisational and professional identification (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017) heightens the complexity and relevance of understanding professionals' willingness to share knowledge. We, therefore, pose the following research questions:

- How do professionals perceive knowledge sharing in their daily work?
- How can professionals' willingness to share knowledge be understood, in relation to their power and identification within the work context?

### **1.4. Outline of the Thesis**

The paper consists of six chapters, including this introduction. In Chapter 2, we set the theoretical context and introduce the concepts on which we build our research on professionals' willingness to share knowledge and, based on a review of the literature, construct a conceptual framework for our thesis. We begin Chapter 3 on methodology with our research approach, followed by a description of the research design, the data collection and data analysis process, and finally address quality and reflexivity aspects of our study. In Chapter 4, we present the empirical material, along with our initial reflections and interpretations. In Chapter 5, we then further discuss our findings in relation to the conceptual framework. Finally, in Chapter 6, we conclude by presenting our research contribution and limitations of our study, as well as practical implications and suggestions for further research.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

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In this chapter, we set the theoretical context and introduce the concepts on which we build our research on professionals' willingness to share knowledge. Based on this literature review, we construct a conceptual framework for our thesis.

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### **2.1. Knowledge Sharing in Professional Service Firms**

In the following two sections, we introduce the concepts of PSF and knowledge sharing. This appears pertinent as it provides the theoretical context for understanding professionals' willingness to share knowledge.

#### **2.1.1. Professional Service Firms and Professionals**

PSFs are a major group of knowledge-intensive firms, whereby the latter "offer to the market the use of fairly sophisticated knowledge or knowledge-based products" (Alvesson, 2004, p.17-18). Nordenflycht (2010) suggests that PSFs, and in particular law firms, can be defined by three criteria, that is, knowledge intensity, low capital intensity and professionalised workforce. Furthermore, PSFs usually employ homogeneous groups of workers in terms of their profession and knowledge (Alvesson, 2004). Maister (2003), in turn, explains PSFs in more practical terms and indicates that apart from financial reward and growth, the goals of PSFs are to deliver top quality service to a client and ensure prosperous careers for the professionals working for it.

Moreover, traditional PSFs, such as law firms, are usually structured in line with the partnership model, whereby management and ownership are inherent to the same group of people (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2009). One form of partnership, specifically in the case of law firms, is true partnership, where each partner owns a part of the business, and both profits and liabilities of the firm are equally shared among them (Empson, 2007). Moreover, the partnership model as such, by involving the idea of 'apprenticeship' - learning from more experienced partners - can be viewed upon as motivating professionals (Greenwood & Empson, 2003; Maister, 2003). While most professionals begin as apprentices within a firm, where they continue to learn in practice, it is the senior professionals who are in charge of sharing knowledge with these apprentices, in order for them to learn the profession while, at the same time, also getting to know the particular firm (Hitt et al., 2001; Jonsson, 2013).

Moreover, a law firm is an extraordinary example of “enabling knowledge workers’ potential” by organising them in teams, but at the same time setting abstract goals to ensure an appropriate level of autonomy that professionals require in their work (Angel, 2007, p.216).

Although the terms ‘professional’ and ‘knowledge worker’ are often used interchangeably, Alvesson (2004) emphasises how ‘knowledge worker’ is a wider term, whereby not all knowledge workers are also professionals. Knowledge workers are attributed distinctive characteristics, such as their elevated work autonomy, their often very pronounced professional identity as well as higher power and influence in the firm due to their expertise (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2009). Professionals, in turn, are further characterised by regulated education, certification and accreditation processes through professional associations, as well as the notions of autonomy, enhanced and specific knowledge and regular client interaction (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Empson, 2007; Styhre, 2011). In other words, professionals have two types of assets: besides their knowledge and skills, it is also the relationships with the clients, to whom they sell this knowledge and skills (Maister, 2003). Nordenflycht (2010) elaborates that professionals in PSFs usually follow certain norms underlying their profession, which are ingrained during education and reinforced by professional associations. Consequently, professionals tend to act in a specific, professional way.

From a theoretical point of view, Alvesson (2004) further suggests that the distinction between professional and non-professional is often based on arbitrariness and, thus, not always useful. In this line, he theorises whether lawyers can be considered professionals, depending on different criteria for professionalism. On the other hand, Styhre (2011), based on the criteria of utilizing specialised knowledge, the existence of formal credentials and admittance barriers to become a professional, depicts lawyers as a clear example of professionals. This understanding is in line with other researchers, who likewise consider lawyers as professionals and professional knowledge workers (Adler et al., 2008; Brown & Lewis, 2011; Jonsson, 2013; Jonsson, 2015; Newell et al., 2009).

Professionals further become experts by specialising their knowledge. Brint (1994, cited in Styhre, 2011, p.17) refers to “expert professionalism” as replacing “social trustee professionalism”, whereby the former implies that a higher significance is placed on expert knowledge and the value thereof in the market, rather than only the status of being a professional. Empson (2007) further theorises that in order to deliver excellent quality service, experts require freedom to exercise their judgement. She suggests that a need for autonomy may as well be taken to the level of self-actualisation through intellectually fulfilling work

tasks. In the law firm, key assets and, consequently, significant sources of power of the professionals, are their expertise, client relationships and reputation (Empson, 2007).

### **2.1.2. Knowledge Sharing**

Knowledge is commonly portrayed as an ambiguous concept, which implies that different individuals may assign different meanings to it (Alvesson, 2004; Kalling & Styhre, 2003; Newell et al., 2009; Styhre, 2011). In broad terms, though, knowledge can be understood in line with the epistemology of possession, where *knowledge* is viewed as a cognitive entity and resource to be captured and transferred, or the epistemology of practice, which is rather based on *knowing* as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by particular contexts. Under the former approach, the emphasis is on converting knowledge from one type to another (tacit/explicit), as well as its location (individual/organisation) and transfer, whereas understanding knowledge as a practice directs towards the sharing of knowledge among interacting groups of individuals (Newell et al., 2009). Kalling and Styhre (2003) further indicate that knowledge is difficult to capture in functionalist and instrumental knowledge sharing models, primarily because of the difficulty to distinguish between data, information and knowledge. Nevertheless, they agree that knowledge can be shared in practice, in most general forms, simplistically, as writing down the codified (explicit) knowledge and orally communicating the uncoded (tacit) knowledge.

In their review on knowledge sharing research, Wang and Noe (2010) depict precisely the idea of knowledge sharing as a determinant of the success of initiatives towards managing knowledge. When it comes to PSFs, knowledge management is a central process within the organisation, and knowledge sharing is viewed as a key concept and regular professional work practice (Jonsson, 2015; Styhre, 2011). It is “only through interacting and consequently through jointly constituting knowledge” that professionals can uphold their credibility and legitimacy as professionals and experts (Styhre, 2011, p.163). In this line, Styhre (2011) claims that knowledge sharing does not occur with the primary aim to provide help to peers or colleagues, but due to the necessity thereof in order to perform their work.

However, knowledge sharing is a complex and two-sided process that involves both providing and acquiring knowledge (Kalling & Styhre, 2003; Quigley et al, 2007; Reinholt et al., 2011). Gao and Riley (2010), in this context, suggest that participating in knowledge sharing activities does not necessarily imply providing one’s expert knowledge to others. Further, knowledge sharing can be impacted by behaviours which demonstrate unwillingness to share

knowledge, such as knowledge hoarding (Holten et al., 2016), withholding (Stenius et al., 2016) or hiding (Serenko & Bontis, 2016). In the same line, Styhre (2011) acknowledges that, from an individual point of view, professionals may decide to preserve their knowledge rather than allowing others to take advantage of it. Thus, as Gibbert and Krause (2002, cited in Bock et al., 2005, p.88) phrase it, “knowledge sharing concerns the willingness of individuals in an organisation to share with others the knowledge they have acquired or created.”

## **2.2. Willingness to Share Knowledge**

In this section, we introduce the theoretical concepts whereupon we base our research on professionals’ willingness to share knowledge: underlying motivational factors, knowledge as a source of power, and professionals’ identification within the work context, or more specifically, with organisation and profession.

### **2.2.1. Underlying Motivational Factors**

Kalling and Styhre (2003) refer to how knowledge is frequently regarded as good *per se*, thus often not requiring any additional incentives to share it. However, they further elaborate that, while receiving new knowledge may be desired, transferring one’s own knowledge is another side of the same process, which might not be as desired. Thus, one’s willingness to engage in knowledge sharing can - in contrast to this widely shared view - not be entirely separated from incentives or motivation. Moreover, Wang and Noe (2010), in their review on knowledge sharing research, acknowledge how the consideration of motivation and motivational factors to understand organisational phenomena has led to significant insights for comprehending why employees engage in certain voluntary behaviour in the work context. Consequently, they suggest that applying these factors to the area of knowledge sharing may likewise provide valuable insights.

According to Kalling and Styhre’s (2003) research, knowledge sharing is embedded in social relationships, through which individuals are incentivised, which means that employees are rewarded for better work output, and to achieve the latter they need to share their knowledge. Moreover, Wang and Noe (2010) refer to the idea of impressing others through sharing knowledge. In their research on knowledge sharing behaviour, Bock et al. (2005) discuss how anticipated reciprocity positively influences individuals’ attitude towards sharing knowledge. In a similar line, Gao and Riley (2010) acknowledge that reciprocity influences the willingness to both participate in knowledge sharing practices and provide others with

knowledge. Additionally, knowledge sharing can also be perceived as an opportunity to learn for the person who is sharing, which may be a motivational factor inducing some people to engage in knowledge sharing (Wang & Noe, 2010). On the other hand, Kalling and Styhre (2003) also distinguish several factors that may negatively affect individuals' willingness to share knowledge in organisations. For instance, they refer to both the perceived risk of giving up the ownership of the knowledge and appear as less unique and superior, as well as a certain reluctance to dedicate time and efforts to support others (Szulanski, 1996, cited in Kalling & Styhre, 2003).

With regard to motivation, McGregor (1960) proposes two different ideas of humans, though assigning more validity to the latter: while according to Theory X humans lack motivation and require external impulses and control mechanisms to engage in work activities, Theory Y proposes a state of internal motivation and activity for every human being. Furthermore, McGregor argues that external control and direction by management address human needs - related to safety - that no longer serve as motivators for human behaviour (Heil et al., 2000). By contrast, it is the individuals themselves who control and direct their work (McGregor, 2006). Their desire for self-esteem (i.e. self-respect, self-confidence, autonomy, achievement, competence, knowledge) and reputation (i.e. status, recognition, appreciation, respect), on the other hand, can serve as a motivator when satisfied (Heil et al., 2000; McGregor, 2006). This resembles Herzberg's two-factor theory, differentiating between hygiene factors - whose mere satisfaction does not affect human behaviour - and motivators (Herzberg et al., 1959). According to McGregor (1960), these higher needs of self-esteem and reputation cannot be satisfied by management, but the organisation can only create conditions where one can be enabled to strive for self-esteem. What professionals want, McGregor argues, is to develop and to achieve certain status (Heil et al., 2000). Instead of management controlling people, McGregor's Theory Y supports an emphasis on valuing and developing them, thereby enabling the individuals to further grow as well as to seek and assume the responsibility for themselves (McGregor, 2006).

Aligned to the proposition that - in line with Theory Y - humans exercise self-control rather than they are controlled by management, McGregor further suggests that professionals often draw on their knowledge as a base for their influence and control (McGregor, 2006). Moreover, with regard to professionals, McGregor likewise acknowledges that there are 'locals', on the one hand, who easily adapt to an organisation, and 'cosmopolitans', on the other hand, who - regardless of where they work - identify strongly with their profession (Heil et al., 2000, p.151). These aforementioned notions serve as a link to the concepts of power

and identification which, in line with Wang and Noe's (2010) framework, may affect knowledge sharing either directly, or indirectly through motivational factors.

### **2.2.2. Knowledge as Source of Power**

Knowledge can be understood as a source of power and influence in the knowledge-intensive context (Kärreman, 2010). In general, though, power is a broad concept and difficult to pin down due to its diverse use and complexity, which includes both negative and positive connotations (Clegg et al., 2006). Under a more conventional understanding, power entails a coercive notion, which simplistically can be explained as one's open influence over others with the intention to force them to engage in activities that they otherwise would not occupy themselves with (Gordon & Grant, 2004). In the knowledge-intensive context though, an alternative view of power becomes apparent, that is, knowledge workers' capacity to influence (Kärreman, 2010). Moreover, when knowledge is unique and not commonly shared, this heightens workers' power in a firm context, in terms of influence and value for the firm (Alvesson et al., 2015), or even becomes a major source of one's power in the organisation (Newell et al., 2009).

In the knowledge-intensive context, characterised by a profound shift of power, where authority within the hierarchical structure loses significance as knowledge facilitates a horizontal division of labour, power can be understood as enabling actors to behave in particular ways, rather than forcing the desired behaviour on them (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman, 2010). Thus a 'power over' becomes a 'power to' (Chan, 2000, cited in Kärreman, 2010). Similarly, Alvesson (2004) discusses power as expressed through knowledge in the knowledge-intensive firms, where knowledge creates truth and determines standards, to which actors subordinate themselves. Lundholm et al. (2012, p. 119) likewise suggest how, besides hierarchy and formal authority, influencing others within organisations also occurs through knowledge, thus lying with those who have a better understanding of the work, and pointing to a "horizontalization." As the authors further elaborate, these vertical and horizontal notions of authority coexist in constant interaction. Moreover, in the environment of a high level of expertise and autonomy of knowledge workers, and the downplaying of organisational hierarchy, knowledge becomes an active force used to influence meanings within the organisation, and may provide more authority than the formal position (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015).



In the context of knowledge sharing, power is viewed both as hindering and inducing the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. Starbuck (1992, p.737) argues for knowledge as a source of power and the loss thereof as a result of knowledge sharing: “[e]soteric expertise has monopoly power and this power erodes as expertise becomes less esoteric.” In a similar line, Morris and Empson (1998) acknowledge that professionals may regard sharing their knowledge as a threat to the power that is vested in their unique expertise. As Bock et al. (2005) suggest, knowledge sharing leads to a loss of an individual’s unique value. Moreover, these authors likewise point to the risk of one’s reputation being harmed if shared knowledge is considered faulty or insignificant. Moreover, Wang and Noe (2010) refer to knowledge as giving people power and superiority, based on their unique skills and expertise, by which they are able to differentiate themselves from their peers. This distinctiveness, in combination with an individual’s fear of losing given status of power, thus potentially inhibits the willingness to share knowledge. On the other hand, though, these authors likewise acknowledge lines of thinking which propose that it is through knowledge sharing that given “expert power” (Wang & Noe, 2010, p.124) may augment rather than diminish, in line with the idea of experiencing recognition for sharing knowledge. Similarly, Hislop (2005, cited in Kelly, 2007, p.129) offers a two-fold view on the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing: on the one hand, one can be reluctant to share knowledge for fearing to lose the power by giving away the knowledge, while, on the other hand, willingness to share knowledge may be induced by recognition and an obtained higher status from “being seen to use personal knowledge.”

Therefore, the notion of unique expert knowledge as valuable and career enhancing (Newell et al., 2009) does not facilitate knowledge sharing *per se*. As a voluntary activity (Newell et al., 2009), knowledge sharing cannot be arbitrarily enforced through ‘power over’ (Kärreman, 2010). Thus, the power in terms of influence which knowledge workers have due to the shifted balance between vertical and horizontal power structures (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman, 2010), potentially affects their willingness to share knowledge. Moreover, this willingness may likewise be affected by professionals’ identification within the work context, as identification influences the way of acting and behaving (Ashforth et al., 2008).

### **2.2.3. Identification Within the Work Context**

Identification can be explained as “the process through which individuals come to define who they are, through identifying with a target” (Atewologun et al., 2017, p.273). This target, in turn, can be a group in terms of a collective, such as an organisation or work team, and in terms of a role, as can be the occupation (Ashforth et al., 2008). On the other hand, the term

'identification' is likewise used as a noun, hereby describing "an active and positive connection" (Brown, 2017, p.299), between the self and the target - in contrast to dis-identification whereby this connection is negative. Thus, when used as a noun and not as a verb, identification describes the current state, rather than the process of defining one's self-view (Ashforth et al., 2008). Moreover, it is through identification that individuals at the same time respectively "express distinctiveness and sameness" to fellow humans, depending on which group one identifies with (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004, p.154).

Ashforth et al. (2008) further elaborate on how only by understanding the concept of identity, is it possible to comprehend identification. Hatch and Schultz (2000, p.15) also distinguish between research on "identity of" a certain group itself and research on "identification with", which concerns the connection between individual and group. Identity, which is increasingly understood as subjective, socially constructed and changing over time, refers to the questions 'who am I' or 'who are we' and affects individuals' understandings and ways of acting, interacting, prioritising and being motivated (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Ashforth et al., 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identification with collectives and roles, in particular, refers to social identities, based on the membership in a group, which can be a collective or role, and the underlying value ascribed to it (Ashforth et al., 2008). It is essential to acknowledge different identities, such as social and organisational identity, which, however, do not exist in isolation but rather in intersection, and mutually affect one another (Alvesson et al., 2015). As Empson (2004) argues in her study on identity in accounting firms as PSFs, professionals' understanding of their professional role is profoundly affected by the organisational identity of the respective firm.

The existence of different foci or targets of identification is widely acknowledged in existing research (Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017; Vough, 2012). Ashforth et al. (2008) likewise refer to the possibility of having multiple identifications, which they suggest may converge or combine to a certain extent. Within the work context, individuals are continuously subject to different targets of identification, that is, groups they can identify with, such as workgroups, departments or professions, and hold several work identifications simultaneously (Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Vough, 2012). Atewologun et al. (2017), in this respect, classify between organisationally situated and occupation-based foci of identification. This implies that, while identification with workgroup and organisation both belong to the organisationally situated category, identification with the profession, on the other hand, is occupation-based.

Finally, Van Knippenberg (2000) suggests how a salient identification with a certain target induces an individual's willingness to act in line with the interests that relate to this target. In a similar line but becoming more concrete, Gao and Riley (2010), in their review on knowledge and identity, suggest that identification with a group affects an individual's willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. Subsequently, we examine both organisational identification and professional identification in more detail.

### ***Organisational Identification***

Brown (2017) refers to organisational identification - in line with understanding it as a verb - as a process and the manner in which individuals' self-views rely on their organisational memberships, whereas Dutton et al. (1994, p.239) describe it as "the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization." In this line, Hatch and Schultz (2000) suggest how organisational identity builds the base for the workers' identification with the firm, as it is the identity of the organisation that they attach meaning to and create a connection with. It is suggested that especially in PSFs, workers frequently draw on the organisation as a source for defining their self-view (Alvesson et al., 2015). Dutton et al. (1994) further theorise how an individual's identification with the organisation is strengthened when the perceived organisational identity is more attractive, more consistent to how the individual would define him- or herself, more distinct to other organisations, and when it enables individuals to achieve higher self-esteem. In turn, these authors elaborate that, when individuals identify strongly with an organisation, they tend to view the firm more positively, show more cooperation towards colleagues and, in general, higher interest in the preservation of the firm, thus acting in ways that are beneficial for colleagues and the firm as a whole (see also Van Knippenberg, 2000).

Organisational identity cannot be fully separated from organisational culture, as the latter constitutes the context in which organisational identity is internally defined, from the members' perspective, as well as the context in which individuals make meaning thereof (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Organisational culture and identity are conceptually intertwined and frequently used to define one another (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Moreover, the notions of identity and identification as means for the firm to control knowledge work, by influencing or indirectly regulating and managing them (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004), as well as through organisational routines (Brown & Lewis, 2011), become apparent. However, this notion of control refers to the organisational rather than the individuals' perspective.

Furthermore, within an organisation, individuals may identify more with the team or the workgroup they belong to, which may be affected by the notion of a higher degree of exclusivity as well as a more immediate collaboration and uniformity (Ashforth et al., 2008). Argote and Ingram (2000) highlight that individuals' stronger identification with the workgroup may potentially become an obstacle to ensure smooth knowledge transfer across the entire organisation. While differentiating between team and organisation as foci for identification, Atewologun et al. (2017) suggest how both constitute embedded work identifications, since they belong to the same category of organisationally situated foci. Professional identification, in turn, is occupation-based.

### ***Professional Identification***

Professionals may develop a very pronounced and specific - also described as 'elitist' (Alvesson, 2001; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015) - professional identity, due to the esteem perceived for their expertise and knowledge, their education and certain admittance mechanisms to the profession (Alvesson, 2004; Styhre, 2011). Furthermore, this strong professional identity can likewise be a powerful focus for identification. As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016, p.62) phrase it, "knowledge workers often see their own profession as a strong source of identification." While a professional identity can reside in organisational contexts, the focus of identification hereby refers to the profession itself, rather than the firm (Atewologun et al., 2017). Professional identification implies that professionals' "sense of self in the context of doing professional work ... is influenced by social discourses concerning what professionals do and what they are like" (Atewologun et al., 2017, p.286). Similarly, Vough (2012, p.786) points out that professional identification depends on whether one's self-view corresponds to the "archetypal image" - the ideal - of the profession.

Professional identification, as Vough (2012) elaborates, may as well be based on distinct characteristics of the profession, as organisations rarely display recognisably different features. These distinct characteristics of a particular profession, in turn, likewise serve as a basis for differentiating between various professions (Vough, 2012). Empson (2007) argues that for lawyers it is their expert status which strongly shapes their own perception as professionals. Atewologun et al. (2017) similarly distinguish between professional identification in terms of identifying with the occupational role itself, in contrast to identifying with the notion of professionalism in more general terms, being a professional as compared to being a non-professional.

However, not all professionals identify with their profession alike. McGregor refers to two camps of professionals: those who easily adapt to an organisation, and those who - regardless of where they work - identify strongly with their profession (Heil et al., 2000). Alvesson (2004) takes this discussion even further and theorises how knowledge workers may identify more with their profession than with the organisation they work in, which affects their identity. Consequently, due to the strong professional identity, organisations may potentially be reduced to being mere “arenas” for the professionals to engage in professional activities (Alvesson, 2004, p.36). Vough (2012), in her study on architects as one professional group, refers to how professionals may identify with certain characteristics of their profession, but not with other, less favourable ones. The presence of less attractive characteristics, she claims, may cause individuals to partially distance themselves from their profession, due to not wanting their self-view to rely on such characteristics.

In connection with knowledge and knowledge sharing, Gao and Riley (2010) suggest that knowledge can be viewed as a central element of an individual's professional identity. Consequently, these authors further argue that a possessive thinking towards knowledge may develop, and hinder knowledge sharing behaviour. On the other hand, Jonsson (2013, p.66), with respect to lawyers in particular, refers to knowledge sharing as being “embedded ... in the legal profession and the professional role of lawyer.” In a similar line, Styhre (2011) claims that professionals do engage in knowledge sharing, however not for the primary reason of supporting their colleagues, but rather out of necessity to carry out their own work properly.

### **2.3. Framework for the Thesis**

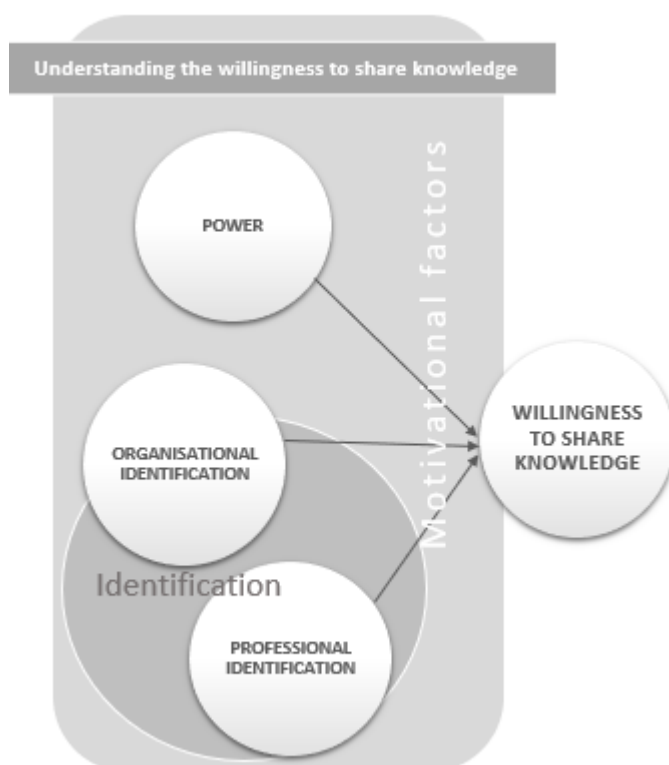
With this study, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of professionals’ perspective and perception of knowledge sharing, as well as their willingness to share knowledge in PSFs. For this purpose, we synthesise the existing literature previously reviewed in this chapter, into a statement on how the chosen concepts - professionals’ power and their organisational and professional identification within the work context - are further connected to professionals’ willingness, thus constituting the conceptual framework for our thesis.

Professionals’ willingness to share their knowledge in PSFs appears to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon (e.g. Gao & Riley, 2010; Newell et al., 2009; Wang & Noe, 2010). It is influenced by a number of environmental and individual factors (Wang & Noe, 2010) as well as the professional context (Styhre, 2011). We intend to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon by adopting the individuals’ perspective rather than the organisational

one, as the latter has been more researched so far (Wang & Noe, 2010). We further choose the concept of power to analyse professionals' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing, as in this context knowledge becomes a source of power (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Newell et al., 2009). Based on the previous research, power may both induce and hinder professionals' willingness to provide others with their knowledge (Hislop, 2005, cited in Kelly, 2007; Morris & Empson, 1998; Starbuck, 1992; Wang & Noe, 2010).

Moreover, knowledge workers tend to develop a strong identification with their profession (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2004; Styhre, 2011; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). This professional identification, however, does not preclude the individuals from identifying with the organisation they work for (Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017). Nonetheless, it is suggested that the professional identification may be stronger than the organisational one (Alvesson, 2004; Heil et al., 2000; Vough, 2012). In general, such different targets of identification potentially affect the directions towards which individuals choose to share their knowledge, or refrain from knowledge sharing (Gao and Riley, 2010; Styhre, 2011; Van Knippenberg, 2000). Ultimately, the willingness to share knowledge cannot be separated from underlying motivational factors (Heil et al., 2000; McGregor, 1960; Herzberg et al., 1959), as they may influence the relationships between power, identification and willingness to share knowledge.

Thus, the concepts of professionals' knowledge as source power and their identification



within the work context, or more specifically with organisation and profession, in combination with underlying motivational factors, shall build the conceptual framework (Figure 1) for our research on understanding professionals' willingness to share knowledge in PSFs.

*Figure 1: Conceptual Framework - Understanding the willingness to share knowledge*

### 3. Methodology

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In this chapter, we introduce the reader to the methodological approach of our thesis. We begin by presenting the research approach, followed by a description of the research design which we use in line with given approach. Thereafter, we illustrate both the data collection and data analysis process, before ultimately addressing the aspects of quality and reflexivity of our research.

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#### 3.1. Research Approach

With our research, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of professionals' perspective and perception of knowledge sharing, as well as their willingness to share knowledge in PSFs. By asking professionals about their perception of knowledge sharing, we recognise that knowledge is subjective and that the interpretations made by these professionals build the base of our study. In the same line, we acknowledge our influences as researchers with our prior knowledge and understandings (Prasad, 2018). Thus, the knowledge and insights gained about our topic of study evolve through our interaction with the interviewees during the conversations (Kvale, 1996; Silverman, 2006) and are further shaped by the interpretations we subsequently make (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018).

It is not in the essence of our research to identify mechanisms that allow for the PSFs to enhance knowledge sharing behaviour, though we refrain from ruling out that certain contributions may be deductible. Nonetheless, the insights we intend to gain are, based on Habermas categorisation between analytic, hermeneutic and critical knowledge (Prasad, 2018), of hermeneutic nature, as we aim to understand the professionals' perception of knowledge sharing and willingness to share. Moreover, in line with McGregor's Theory Y, humans are naturally motivated to work (Heil et al., 2000). This view on human nature seems more applicable to professionals, given their distinctive characteristics and autonomous way of working. Knowledge workers' motivation is embedded in how they themselves perceive their work, rather than being induced by management (Newell et al., 2009). Thus, the intention to understand the professionals' - as a group of knowledge workers - willingness to share knowledge within the scope of internal work motivation, presents a guiding principle for our research.

As we are interested in professionals' perception and willingness to share knowledge, we base our research on a qualitative method, in order to better "see through the eyes" of the professionals we study (Bryman, 2012, p.401). We further follow an interpretive approach

with elements of the hermeneutic tradition. The latter comprises an analytical circle of text and its wider context, such as organisational background, researchers' pre-understandings and linguistic elements of the text (Prasad, 2005). This sensitivity to context in qualitative research permits deeper insights into actors' participation in the creation of the phenomena under scrutiny (Silverman, 2006). Qualitative research is portrayed as most suitable for studies concerning people's perspectives and commonly shared practices with regard to the topic of study (Flick, 2007). We use an abductive approach, which incorporates characteristics of both induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018), to combine existing theoretical concepts with the themes emerging from our empirical material. We build our analysis of the empirical material on our chosen theoretical concepts - power and identification - with the aim to understand how the professionals perceive knowledge sharing and their willingness to share knowledge. At the same time, however, we remain open for unexpected themes emerging as we progress with collecting and analysing the empirical material.

### **3.2. Research Design**

For the purpose of our research, we choose to study lawyers as a classical example of professionals. After describing the specific case context of our study, we further introduce the reader to our data collection method. Our primary source of data is semi-structured interviews with the professionals from two law firms.

#### **3.2.1. Case Context**

The offices of the two law firms at which we interview professionals - Lolaf & Partners (local law firm) and Ilaf & Partners (international law firm) - are both based in Sweden. Moreover, one of the firms originally evolved from the other around 15 years ago. Presently, however, the firms operate independently and are not connected by any formal association or another form of affiliation. Lolaf & Partners has about 25 lawyers, whose work is organised in six different legal practice groups and focuses on servicing local clients. Ilaf & Partners, on the other hand, is part of a major worldwide organisation and has a wide international profile. However, its office in Sweden is rather small and unites approximately 35 lawyers, divided into seven legal practice groups. Teamwork within the particular legal practice groups is displayed as the most common form of daily work organisation in both law firms, with the exception of large projects where the involvement of members of more than one legal practice group is required.



Regarding the ownership model, the two firms are organised as true partnership or lockstep system, where partners own parts of the business, and both profits and liabilities of the firm are equally shared among them (Empson, 2007). Thus, the idea of sharing is ingrained in the way the two firms' work is organised as well as it is reflected in the profit sharing system. Moreover, some of the lawyers we interview are admitted to lawyers' professional association - the Swedish Bar Association - while the junior lawyers are not yet members. As Styhre (2011) elaborates, lawyers are professionals who receive credentials through their university education as well as from their professional association, both being complementary rather than substitutable. Morris and Empson (1998) further suggest that in the PSF context, the presence of such external association makes the knowledge more profession-specific than oriented towards a particular organisation.

Ilaf & Partners has a specific function - knowledge and learning manager/advisor - dedicated to coordinating the knowledge sharing, while at Lolaf & Partners the lawyers themselves are responsible for organising the knowledge sharing within the firm. Nevertheless, despite having this specific function within the firm, also the lawyers at Ilaf & Partners are responsible for and directly involved in knowledge sharing, given the small office size. Moreover, key tools and processes for knowledge sharing - knowledge management systems, formal training and continuous learning as part of the work in teams, as well as interactions between lawyers outside the work setting, such as during coffee breaks and informal events - remain of the same nature in both law firms.

### **3.2.2. Data Collection Method**

The primary source of information for our research are interviews with professionals from the two law firms. Conducting our interviews at two law firms does, however, not imply that we aim to engage in a comparative analysis between the findings in both firms, but rather shall it enable us to gain a more complete and in-depth picture of the phenomenon of knowledge sharing and the willingness to engage in it, from the professionals' perspective and in the context of PSFs and professional work (Farquhar, 2012). Adding to the common past that unites both firms, this also appears pertinent given that both offices, whereat the interviews are conducted, are of similar size and similarly divided into legal practice groups. Our intention is, thus, not to look for differences between both, but similarities regarding professionals' willingness to share knowledge, that appear throughout the interviews. From a technical point of view, this likewise leads us to not distinguishing between both firms throughout our thesis.

We conduct the interviews in a semi-structured manner which allows us to gain insights into “the life world” (Kvale, 1996, p.6) of the interviewees with respect to their perception of knowledge sharing and willingness to engage in it. For this purpose, we design an interview guide with main topics to cover, but still follow a conversational approach, aiming for a two-sided conversation with the interviewees, rather than a classic interview situation of asking and answering questions in a pre-established chronological order (Bryman, 2012). These rather “loosely structured” interviews allow the professionals to address and discuss most relevant aspects, from their perspective, thereby enabling a richer understanding of their ideas (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.71). Moreover, in designing our study, we intend to have access to a group of lawyers as varied as possible (Bryman, 2012) in terms of seniority, professional background, practice field and time spent with the firm, with the intention to thereby obtain a more complete idea about the topic of interest from varied perspectives. Hence, we conduct eleven single interviews with lawyers (see appendix for anonymised list of interviewees and their respective seniority), complemented by two single interviews with the firm’s knowledge manager and advisor, who are the professionals in charge of knowledge management throughout the organisation.

While the lawyers and the interviews conducted with them present the key of our research interest, knowledge managers’ input enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the knowledge sharing environment and systems, thereby enriching the context for our study. Further, we conduct a document analysis, based on the law firms’ websites, intranet content, knowledge sharing systems and tools, which in line with the hermeneutic tradition shall provide us with the context for the interpretation of the interviews (Bowen, 2009; Prasad, 2005) and enable us to capture the essence of interviewees’ messages. Especially regarding specific language and commonly used names of the firms’ platforms or processes, the document analysis helps us to better make sense of interviewees’ narratives. Moreover, it may hint at additional topics to be covered and follow-up questions to be asked to the interviewees, thereby possibly enabling us to gain broader insights, understand the context, and augment the data for our study (Bowen, 2009). For the same purpose, we have a meeting with a group of knowledge managers of major business law firms in Sweden, which shall help us to comprehend the knowledge sharing context in this business and therefore to understand better the perceptions of the lawyers we interview. By this approach, we aim to obtain empirical data that is rich enough to gain valuable insights into lawyers’ perspective on knowledge sharing.

### 3.3. Data Collection Process

During all interviews, which all are conducted in a face-to-face manner, both researchers participate in the conversation, instead of one of us acting as an observer only. Thereby, we aim to create a more natural setting which shall minimise interviewees' feeling of being under close observation, hence increasing their openness and inducing them to speak and act in a natural way (Bryman, 2012). For this same purpose, the firms and the names of all interviewees are anonymised in our thesis (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Nonetheless, an anonymised list of the interviewees and their respective seniority within the firms is provided in the appendix, which shall contribute to a better understanding of the analysis and discussion of the empirical material. Moreover, we approach the interviews with a true interest in interviewees' experiences and perspectives, which also enables us to build a better relationship with the interviewees (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006). All interviews are conducted in English, take place in meeting rooms at the firms' offices and have a duration of approximately one hour. With the permission of the interviewees and the guarantee from our side that the material will not be shared with anyone or used for other purposes than our analysis, all interviews are fully recorded. This enables us as researchers to focus on the content and context during the interviews, rather than having to take extensive notes, as well as it allows us to subsequently transcribe all interviews for the purpose of our analysis.

The topics we address during the interviews include the professional background and motivation to become and work as a lawyer, the company context and day-to-day organisation of work, the lawyers' ideas and perceptions of knowledge sharing, and their willingness to share knowledge. Questions we ask include, for instance: 'What comes to your mind when you hear knowledge sharing?', 'What role does it play in your work?', 'In which situations does it mostly occur?', 'Is there anything that prevents you from knowledge sharing?', 'Can you give an example?' and 'What, how and why did you share or did you not share?' While introductory questions, such as 'Can you describe a situation in which you shared knowledge with someone else?', have the intention to collect lawyers' rich but spontaneous first thoughts on the topic, we use follow-up, probing and specifying questions ('What do you mean by that?', 'How did that happen?', 'Why did you do that?') in order for the interviewees to further elaborate on a topic (Kvale, 2007). We thereby intend to better understand and obtain a broader and clearer idea of their thoughts and perspectives. In this same line, we also use silence as means to giving the interviewees time to reflect and induce them to further amplify their viewpoints. Though the focus clearly lies on these rather general questions, we also include some more direct questions, such as 'What gives a lawyer power within the firm?'

which, however, we only ask in the later stages of the interviews, after the interviewees have had a chance to display their own perspectives and highlight the most relevant aspects (Kvale, 2007). Ultimately, we specifically ask the interviewees to address aspects which they believe have been omitted so far, as well as to draw a conclusion on the topic.

During the interviews, we pay special attention to specific language or metaphors used by several of the interviewees (Alvesson, 2003). On the other hand, following Wang and Noe's (2010) suggestion that, from a viewpoint of practice, a clear distinction between the terms 'knowledge' and 'information' adds little utility to studies on knowledge sharing, we refrain from focussing on how our interviewees apply these terms, but consider them as being used interchangeably. Moreover, we are aware of the difficulty of verbally depicting knowledge - an integral part of our study - as well as the related concepts of data and information, as such, especially in abstract terms and out of context (Styhre, 2011). This leads to the importance of collecting the interviewees' stories and voices during this phase of our research.

#### **3.4. Data Analysis Process**

We interpret the empirical material collected during the interviews with the aim to connect data and selected conceptual framework in a meaningful way (Styhre, 2013). To this end, we transcribe all interviews and employ open and axial coding techniques to fragment the material, identify key terms used by the interviewees, and categorise them (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For this purpose, we apply both 'apriori codes' which derive from our research interest, and 'empirical codes' emerging from the data (Gibson & Brown, 2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Moreover, moving from sentence to sentence and from paragraph to paragraph, we look at repetitions, local terms, metaphors, similarities, differences and contradictions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We further proceed by splitting or deleting codes, as well as creating code families, which helps us to establish connections between different codes (Gibson & Brown, 2011). To pursue a higher degree of validity of the identified themes in our data, we perform the coding of the empirical material individually (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Subsequently, having agreed on recurring patterns, irregularities and contradictions, we look for themes emerging both from the theoretical background and the empirical data, by using constant comparison method, which allows establishing similarities and differences through systematic comparisons among different units of empirical material (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For the purpose of reduction, we look for the most interesting categories and link the different themes to each other (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At the same time, we engage in a reflexive

analysis of the research questions, grounded in the empirical data, and combine it with a challenge to existing assumptions about knowledge sharing. In line with the hermeneutic approach, while analysing the text we move back and forth between text and context, which helps us to obtain a better understanding of the text (Prasad, 2018). We therefore constantly refer back to the context, in terms of locating the data within the overall picture gained by speaking with knowledge managers and by the insights obtained through our document analysis. Similarly, we move between the data and the conceptual framework, selected for our research (Prasad, 2018), to better comprehend our findings and further understand professionals' willingness to share knowledge.

### **3.5. Quality and Reflexivity**

While reliability and validity do not appear as relevant criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2006), it is crucial to seek for the trustworthiness of our study and engage in source critique (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2017). Hereby, we come to the realisation that people tend to view knowledge as a key element of contemporary business and working life (Alvesson, 2004), thus potentially ascribing a positive notion to its sharing. This may lead to the situation where interviewees provide researchers with 'socially desirable' responses or omit less positive parts of information (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Thus, it is pertinent for us to stay aware of interviewees' potentially too positive connotations to knowledge, which may affect their responses. We take this potential limitation into account when designing our study and we stay alert to 'overly smooth stories' throughout the research process. In the same line, we take into account that interviewees - despite us guaranteeing their anonymity - may want to convey a good impression of their own work and their organisations, by avoiding embarrassing affirmations and highlighting only relevant examples (Alvesson, 2003). Another aspect to critically consider follows from the ambiguity of knowledge as a concept, and thus the variety of ways in which the professionals may understand it. Consequently, we are aware that interviewees may experience difficulties in verbally expressing their thoughts and ideas on knowledge and its sharing (see also Alvesson, 2003; Styhre, 2011).

We further acknowledge how every interview presents a "complex social situation" (Alvesson, 2003, p.18) which is not routine for the interviewees, nor for us as interviewing researchers. Interviews, in general, and language, in particular, cannot be separated from the context in which they occur. Hence, interviewees' responses need to be viewed upon in this social context, without neglecting underlying norms that possibly guide behaviour and

language in such situation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). On the other hand, our lacking experience as interviewers might likewise become apparent in our reactions, language, facial expressions and body language which may, in turn, prompt interviewees to react and respond in a particular way, thus unintentionally influencing the course of the interview (Alvesson, 2003; Bryman, 2012). Despite our awareness thereof and efforts to avoid this, we recognise that such influence cannot be entirely ruled out. Finally, another limitation lies in the absence of opportunities for us to independently select interviewees for our study. While we have the possibility to provide our preferences in terms of diversity of the group of interviewees, the final selection of lawyers to be interviewed is carried out by our contact persons in the law firms.

In spite of given limitations, by following a reflexive approach, we aim to obtain rich and trustworthy insights, whereupon to base our analysis. In line with Alvesson's (2003) understanding of reflexivity, we intend to remain open to unexpected and emerging ideas, rather than overly relying on rigid predefined theoretical assumptions, as well as we allow for different perspectives and interpretations throughout the research process. To this end, we, for instance, alternate between individual brainstorming and reasoning, followed by discussions and reflexive teamwork between both of us as researchers.

## 4. Analysis

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In this chapter, we present the empirical material, along with our initial reflections and interpretations. First, we portray lawyers' perceptions of knowledge sharing. Subsequently, we illustrate how the chosen concepts - power and identification - appear in practice and relate to the willingness to share knowledge, as well as how this willingness is displayed from the professionals' perspective. Thereupon, we build the discussion of the findings, which follows in Chapter 5.

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### 4.1. Knowledge Sharing - do professionals think about it?

In order to comprehend professionals' willingness to share knowledge, it is important to understand how they perceive knowledge sharing. From the empirical material, it becomes apparent how knowledge sharing is not a topic that the lawyers think about on a day-to-day basis when performing their work.

*“I’ve never thought that much about knowledge sharing.” (Rasa)*

Even though the interviewees illustrate how knowledge sharing is performed on a daily basis and is important for their work, this statement highlights that it is not a topic that lawyers actively reflect on in their day-to-day work. On the contrary, knowledge sharing is portrayed by all interviewees as happening naturally and perceived as both inherent and necessary for their daily work, and thus as a common work practice.

*“That’s on a daily basis. I would say, more or less. I wouldn’t even see the informal bits as knowledge sharing, it’s, for me it’s not like an extra obstacle that I need to pass, it’s integrated in the way I work.” (Rokas)*

*“When working together, you share knowledge in the day to day work.” (Darius)*

*“Sharing knowledge is one of the key parts and that’s why we work in teams to be able to share knowledge more effectively inside of the teams, and between the teams.” (Pranas)*

This perception of knowledge sharing as work practice, in turn, relates to viewing knowledge sharing as a business need, and thus being an essential part of lawyers' role and work.

*“Since it is knowledge that we are selling, we need to be efficient and be able to sell it at a high quality and good price and ... you can’t have people that hoard information and don’t share.” (Pranas)*

*“I think if you come here and you participate in this atmosphere and the culture where you share, then you share, automatically.” (Ona)*

The last quote also points to how organisational identification - given an atmosphere and culture that promotes knowledge sharing - may positively influence this notion of knowledge sharing as embedded in daily work and, subsequently, the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing.

Despite limited reflecting about knowledge sharing on a day-to-day basis, certain ideas become apparent when the lawyers are asked to share their perceptions about it. Primarily, a recurring theme is the emphasis on people and discussing, rather than technology and systems. As one interviewee explains, ...

*“... it is easy to have the system, but it might not be easy to find the actual information without the person, because the person can also explain.” (Jonas)*

Moreover, the notions of ‘teaching and learning’ seem strongly anchored in lawyers’ understanding of knowledge sharing, thereby likewise being more pronounced than the firms’ knowledge tools, systems and databases. In this context, all interviewees portray their experiences and thoughts on learning, teaching and educating. More specifically, they refer to the idea of teaching junior colleagues and learning from the more experienced ones. The following quotes display it concisely:

*“It is very much about passing on the knowledge that I have to people that are more junior. I mean, it’s like a chain.” (Rokas)*

*“You pass on knowledge to junior employees, that when you work in projects, it’s both that things need to be done, of course, work tasks, but also there is included an element of learning in it, that you are supposed to learn things and when you do it next time, you do it better. That’s my top of mind when it comes to knowledge sharing, this, so to say this vertical sharing, from the senior employee to a junior employee.” (Marius)*

These references to ‘teaching and learning’ display lawyers’ strong personal learning orientation, thus presenting a good starting point for further understanding lawyers’ willingness to share knowledge, based on their professional identification.



## 4.2. Lawyers - ‘own species’, but still humans

In the empirical material, we come across a clear example of highlighting the exclusivity of being a lawyer, based on the lawyers’ professional identification, primarily because of education, personal interest, and certain admittance mechanisms to the profession.

*“We all have the same background from the educational point of view. In order to become a lawyer, you have to have a degree. That takes away 90% of the population. And then 10% are interested or, you know, remotely interested in practicing law, or studying law. ... But here you need to be a lawyer, so you have to have a law degree. ... First of all, you have to have a Swedish law degree, that also again excludes most people in the world, effectively most people in the world.” (Jonas)*

While the rest of the population is excluded, being a member of this professional group leads to a feeling of exclusivity and sameness. Interestingly, Marija even refers to the community of lawyers as “[her] own species.” This likewise points to a strong professional identification, which is also illustrated in the following quote:

*“It’s a good work, it’s a reputable work. And you have an education you always can have in your luggage, whatever you want to choose, you are a lawyer for the rest of your life.” (Darius)*

Surprisingly though, many interviewees, regardless of their level of seniority, also state that they became lawyers by chance - “just going with the flow”, as Milda phrases it - rather than that being their career plan from the beginning, which is further exemplified by the following quote:

*“I don’t know... It wasn’t crystal clear for me. I tried one course after high school, I pretty much liked it, and then I just continued and then it just evolved on that.” (Rokas)*

Nonetheless, from one partner’s perspective, from all those included in this professional group...

*“... we have to expect that there is a general motivation or interest in solving legal issues, otherwise you wouldn’t want to work in a law firm. So I think that’s the motivation. To be able to make your work life easier, by both sharing and having others share information.” (Jonas)*

Thus, the typical work task of solving legal issues by itself seems to serve as a motivator for lawyers who identify with their profession and enhance their willingness to share knowledge.

Overall, the profession plays a major role in lawyers' understanding of themselves. The following quote depicts three central elements of lawyers' self-view, that become apparent throughout the interviews: development, perfection, and competitiveness.

*“[P]eople have different drivers, and at least among lawyers, you can categorise roughly, to say that people are either competitive, or a bit anxious and insecure, and that drives perfection. And the same with competitiveness. And the third one is the people that would like to develop all the time, developing their technical abilities, developing in the role, specific job.” (Rokas)*

Both a strong personal learning orientation and desire to continuously develop, as well as the striving for excellence, appear to strongly shape lawyers' self-view and be rooted in their professional identification, be it as a lawyer or as a professional in general.

*“I think it makes me a better lawyer, that's what motivates me. ... if you're actually gonna speak on a subject, then you wanna be really, you wanna be good at it, so you do a lot of reading and you study a lot, so learn a lot, before you do it.” (Pranas)*

*“So that's why I think it's a joyful process to share knowledge, because you think that 'oh when I know this, I will be a better professional at what I do.'” (Marius)*

This desire to continuously learn, develop and become better is in line with the lawyers' strongly pronounced perception of knowledge sharing as being connotated with 'teaching and learning'. Furthermore, it connects to lawyers' willingness to share knowledge, as it is through this process that learning and development occurs.

Another central element of lawyers' ideal is perfection or excellence, which is further illustrated through the following quotes:

*“Being a lawyer, you should not make mistakes. People come to you to get the problem solved, you shouldn't mess it up. ... it's very taboo to make mistakes. ... Within the business, the way that everything should be logical, no feelings included, and when it comes to, you should be like a robot, mostly.” (Marija)*

*“If we make mistakes, we get kicked out of the Bar Association, and our clients don't want to work with us, they will work with someone else. If we are not professional enough...” (Jonas)*

Even though this self-image persists, there likewise appears awareness of the fact that professionals are humans in the sense that perfection and excellence are not completely achievable.

*“People can be proud in that sense that you don’t want to admit that you have made mistakes ... I think it’s also a self-image that we don’t do mistakes, that’s how it is, we are perfect in that sense, and everyone knows that that is not the case.” (Marius)*

*“And we learn that we are humans, and, even though we are lawyers [laughing], no one is perfect, and it is completely ok.” (Marija)*

Ultimately, the element of competitiveness is associated with the community of lawyers, which appears to be present and ingrained already during education.

*“I know that at education, there were people hiding books from each other, and taking pages from books and such.” (Ona)*

However, while during education law students may not yet identify with the profession of lawyer, the next quote illustrates how such unwillingness to share knowledge, as induced by competitiveness, likewise may persist after joining a law firm and becoming professionals.

*“I’ve heard stories that some lawyers at other law firms they don’t wanna really share the information, they wanna keep it, and there were like these things also when I studied. ... I think it’s very important that always, motivate employees to share because it always gives you information back.” (Laima)*

This previous quote further points to how an organisational context favouring knowledge sharing and lawyers’ identification with this organisation may counterbalance this element of competitiveness.

### **4.3. Law Firms - more than ‘arenas’ for professional work**

Our empirical data contains frequent examples of referring to ‘us’ and ‘we’ as a firm, common interest to meet the firms’ business objectives and an absence of internal competition, which indicates to a strong identification with the organisation.

*“I don’t compete with people here. We do our best work and I mean, I just want to do a good job for the client, and competing within the firm would not help me doing that... I am competitive, but I want to do great work, but I don’t feel like I am a competitor with the people I work with, so it’s more competitive versus [another law firm].” (Pranas)*

*“I think it’s important that everyone who comes here, realises what kind of culture we have and we are not competitive and we help each other, because I feel more comfortable in such culture and I think everyone does too... I think it would not be good for the atmosphere here, to have someone unwilling to share.” (Ona)*

With regard to the absence of internal competition, a strong identification with the organisation and its culture appears to counterbalance the lawyers’ competitiveness, redirecting it outwards from the firm.

Every interviewee confirms their satisfaction with their organisation, referring to it, for instance, as *“a great place to work” (Laima)* and a firm with *“a good reputation” (Pranas)* and *“really good [legal practice] group” (Rasa)*. These positive affirmations point to interviewees’ identification with the firm. However, when it comes to lawyers’ exclusively positive opinions about their law firms, we are conscious about potentially ‘socially desirable’ responses (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and the lawyers focussing on the more positive aspects.

Nonetheless, with regards to why the lawyers chose and what they particularly like about the firm they work for, some main ideas crystallise. Primarily, the firms’ size is highlighted and, based thereupon, the value placed on every individual professional and the perceived closeness between colleagues, as well as the atmosphere and emphasis on teamwork and collaboration.

*“I think it’s a great size of the company. I think it’s great climate, great people working here.... You get to know everyone, you know their names, you know them on a more personal basis than at a bigger company.” (Ona)*

*“It felt like a good... not a law firm that you’re just one cog in the machine.” (Pranas)*

*“We go to different trips, sometimes. And this Wednesday we will have an ‘after-work’, the whole company. I think it’s great to have something outside of work, connect to one another” (Ona)*

This perception and attitude of the lawyers towards the firm causes them to care more about their colleagues and strengthens the feeling of ‘us’ and ‘we’ as a firm. This is further illustrated by the following quotes:

*“It’s about doing a... not personally always doing a good work, it’s about everyone doing it, so I mean it matters for me that my colleagues do a good job in their matters” (Pranas)*

*“I’m even happy and proud saying that ‘listen, we as a small law firm, we could do it because we have this within our system, we have this amazing knowledge.” (Jonas)*

The previous quote - from a partner’s perspective - also points to the feeling of being proud of the particular law firm due to the combined knowledge of all lawyers, despite the small size of the firm.

In contrast, we hear stories pointing to a changing attitude towards the firm, and moments of unwillingness to share knowledge, when professionals are about to leave, thus potentially identifying less with the firm.

*“When someone is leaving, I think they become a little bit more restricted of their information.” (Laima)*

*“I think that’s very human. [laughing] The motivation level goes down when you are leaving anyway.” (Marius)*

Further, even though the lawyers are very positive about the firm, in terms of knowledge sharing they often refer to the internal legal practice group they belong to, rather than the whole organisation. This potentially hints at closer relationships and a more immediate interaction between the team members. However, our analysis shows that this predominant sharing on the group level may as well be done for practical reasons, such as sharing the knowledge which is relevant to the lawyers who have the same specialisation, thus avoiding an information overload.

*“In [our] team, we just send it out to the group email every time you have something that’s important ... then we’d send it out to the whole team, so everyone has it. Which I think is good.” (Kostas)*

*“I think it is more interesting for me to share, or to receive information within my workgroup, rather than about anything else, that I don’t know anything about ... This is most relevant and beneficial for all.” (Ona)*

Thus, even if the tendency to share knowledge only within the practice group could be viewed as an unwillingness to share the knowledge firm-wide, it apparently does not contradict organisational identification, as this selective sharing still is portrayed as being in the firm's interest. Moreover, identification with a group does not hinder communication throughout the firm when necessary.

*“If I want to speak to one of the other groups I just go up and talk to them, it's not like I have to walk five floors. So, also you meet them regularly, you meet everyone, and it's just, I would say it's easy to talk with everyone.” (Pranas)*

Further, lawyers' strong identification with the firm or a legal practice group within the firm, increases the willingness to share knowledge, induced by the feeling of 'we' and 'us'.

*“If you are working as a team, and you have the feeling that WE need to succeed, not only you, or you or me, WE need to succeed. There is no winner in this, there are WINNERS. I think that's important to establish [the culture], to open up, to share.” (Darius)*

However, when it comes to mistakes, organisational identification does not seem to be strong enough to encourage sharing such knowledge across the entire firm.

*“In my group, I think we share our mistakes. But I wouldn't go to another group and say like, 'hey hey, I made a mistake.' That would be like, aha, what they gonna talk about me when they have coffee breaks.” (Darius)*

This last quote illustrates how lawyers are more comfortable sharing their mistakes within their legal practice group and refrain from sharing it with other groups, which, however, may not be in the best interest of the firm as a whole.

#### **4.4. Power - lost or gained by sharing knowledge?**

In the empirical data, lawyers recognise the notion of power based on the hierarchical structure of law firms.

*“The organisation in law firms is that there's a hierarchy... and I'm not in the position where I decide fully on myself always. I have some cases that I have on my own, but mostly I work with people that are more senior to what I am.” (Rasa)*

*“As an associate, you can’t decide on your own ... And that is a part of the system, you always have someone who is responsible for you as a young lawyer before you get the title ‘advokat’ which is when you become a member of the Bar Association in Sweden.” (Jonas)*

*It [hierarchy] is positive in the way that we often need to make quick decisions on how to move, on how to move forward in different items.” (Marius)*

However, at the same time, they distance themselves from considering hierarchy as utterly positive.

*“I think that in a law firm the hierarchy, I think it’s both a positive thing, but it’s also very much a negative thing. And I think a modern way is to try to balance that.” (Marius)*

Likewise, they distance themselves from considering hierarchy as the only understanding of power, by acknowledging that not only the position within the firm gives people power, but also their knowledge.

*“We have employees that possess enormous expertise and experience within their areas. And if we for any reason would lose that expertise, that would be very challenging for the organisation.” (Marius)*

*“I have an area of expertise that no one else has... So they come with the questions regarding this area of expertise, they come to me.” (Marija)*

The first quote specifically highlights the value placed on lawyers with high expertise, and how the loss thereof is not in the firm’s interest.

Moreover, the following quotes illustrate how, regardless of a junior position, specific knowledge and expertise, and the willingness to share it, increase the influence, and thus the power, of the one who is sharing. This influence, in turn, is accepted by the senior lawyer.

*“If I was an expert in some area that I knew that he [partner] wasn’t that good in ... it would take longer for me to eventually maybe take a step back. And I also think that he would, in that case, listen more and accept my perspective. I noticed that also when we communicate and it’s something that I maybe have a little bit more knowledge of, he is more likely to say ‘ok we do it this way that you want’ because he knows that I have some knowledge more maybe than he.” (Laima)*

*“If I have someone in my team, who is an expert in one area, I listen very much to that, because when it comes to the legal issues I don’t think that I would be able to provide any better thinking on that. ... if anyone else is an expert I don’t really make a second opinion on that [laughing]. Perhaps I can ask questions to see how would this work in this situation or in that, I can put things into context. But otherwise, in our organisation, I think that it’s very much respect for the areas of expertise.” (Marius)*

By contrast, the following quotes, however, also illustrate how the sharing of information and - given that a clear distinction between ‘knowledge’ and ‘information’ adds little utility to studies on knowledge sharing (Wang & Noe, 2010) - of knowledge, implies a loss of power, rather than increased influence.

*“Information is power, but it shouldn’t be in the place like this. And it isn’t here, because we share everything, we share.” (Jonas)*

*“I have everything in my mind, so ... nobody else can use this information and that’s... not so good actually. Well, it’s both, because it’s good for me, because I am more valuable when I have my knowledge to save it to myself, but that’s not the way I think, but that’s a fact.” (Marija)*

The first quote points to the understanding of knowledge as power, which, in the environment where knowledge is shared, loses its notion of power. The second quote, though, is an example of unwillingness to share with the aim to preserve own superiority. However, within our empirical material, the latter is a clear exception rather than a rule. Moreover, the interviewee herself admits that the fact of not sharing knowledge might be ‘*not so good*’.

On the contrary, another understanding of power is displayed, whereby power evolves precisely through the sharing of knowledge.

*“I think that if people share their knowledge very much, people in this organisation would see that they are very knowledgeable and they know a lot of things, and that is power. Then people will look up to you and say that ‘oh you’re so skilful and you know all these things’.” (Marius)*

This previous quote demonstrates the presence of knowledge as power in a sense of being gained through making the knowledge visible, that is, through sharing it. Because “*otherwise they maybe don’t see that that I’m an expert in something*”, as Laima phrases it.



#### 4.5. Willingness - displayed from professionals' perspective

During the interviews, the professionals portray their willingness to engage in knowledge sharing by referring to different drivers that induce this behaviour. Hereby, three main ideas crystallise whereupon this willingness is based (Figure 2).

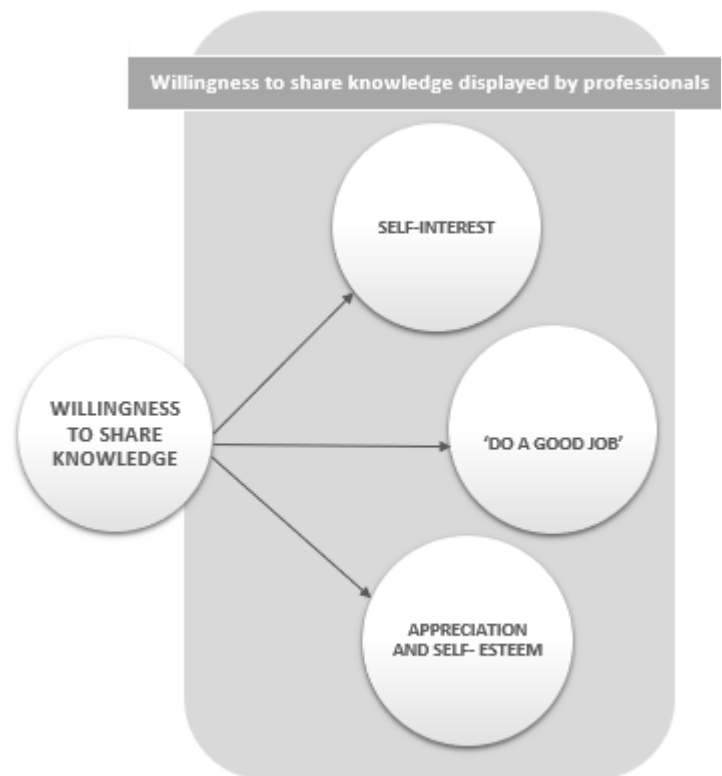


Figure 2: Willingness to share knowledge displayed by professionals

##### *Self-interest*

First, knowledge sharing seems to help make lawyers' work easier, in terms of saving time and receiving higher-quality assistance from their co-workers.

*“So that is a motivation in itself, that you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time.” (Jonas)*

*“It takes time to share knowledge, so being more senior lawyers, they have to invest time in more junior colleagues, to share knowledge. But in the second round, they are gonna be better lawyers, so they are gonna pay back with doing better jobs and save time for the firm.” (Darius)*

Despite the perceived time investment, the idea of better assistance from colleagues and time savings in the future, appear to induce lawyers' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. Moreover, as the following quotes illustrate even more precisely, knowledge sharing seems ingrained in lawyers' professional role and, thus, is in their self-interest.

*“But it's also in my self-interest, because I want qualified help from associates. So that's why it's in my self-interest to share my knowledge with my co-workers so that they can assist me in the best way possible.” (Marius)*

*“From a selfish viewpoint, I guess it’s good that they know it, because then they can do it, like help doing it, the next time. It always takes more time to have a junior associate help you with something but you get it back eventually, because the next time they know how to do it, or they know more about it and can assist in a better way than before.” (Kostas)*

This idea of self-interest likewise connects to the notion of reciprocity. When expecting that others would share their knowledge, this belief - or hope - of receiving knowledge, in turn, seems to be another element that induces lawyers’ willingness to share knowledge.

*“We all need... I will need information, like the next time they have something they will probably, or hopefully, give me some information that I can use in my work.” (Rasa)*

*“And if you expect help, you understand that if I can provide help or input, I would do that as well.” (Jonas)*

*“And others are willing to give me information and help me, that, of course, makes me want to share knowledge too.” (Ona)*

The last quote demonstrates how one’s assumption and perception that others are sharing their knowledge increases the willingness to share, whereas the other two rather display a hope or expectation that such behaviour by others might follow.

Moreover, the professionals refer to themselves and all their co-workers as continuously learning, developing and growing, and thus becoming better at what they do, through knowledge sharing. This relates to the lawyers’ role and self-view as constantly striving for learning, developing and excellence.

*“I learn when I have to tell my colleagues about something that I know, that I have learned. I think I learn better.” (Rasa)*

*“People feel that ‘I’m developing myself, I’m doing this for myself’ because even if people are a bit egoistic here and think ‘I’m doing this just for myself to get better’ in the end that’s very good for the team, because if people are always encouraged, they always want to develop, then we will have a better set of lawyers here and the client will get a better output.” (Rokas)*

*“You want to help each other, you want them to be better, you want them to be independent, you want them to know everything you know.... But we become better, if my colleagues become better, than the firm becomes better, and everything goes better.” (Ona)*

The first, and especially the second quote highlight how the desire to personally develop - one's self-interest - induces the willingness to share knowledge. The last quote, by contrast, demonstrates how the understanding that, when everyone develops this is beneficial for oneself as well, may likewise increase individuals' willingness to share their knowledge with colleagues.

### ***'Doing a good job'***

Secondly, and related to the previously illustrated idea of constantly becoming better, the driver of 'doing a good job' appears highly pronounced regarding lawyers' willingness to share their knowledge, which is exemplified by the following quotes:

*"That's one of the keys of a successful law firm that you share THAT knowledge or experience with everyone else, so when you see it next time you know how to handle it and perhaps grow from that." (Kostas)*

*"For me, it's about being in a great team and doing very good jobs for the client. My motivator is just basically doing a great job for a client and having a great team that can give those resources, that's what motivates me to this [knowledge sharing]." (Pranas)*

*"I think, in the end, it's in the interest of the clients as well, so it makes us do a better job." (Kostas)*

As the lawyers portray it, 'doing a good job' both for the team and the client, part of which is knowledge sharing, leads to the overall success of the firm, which further fosters their willingness to share knowledge.

### ***Appreciation and self-esteem***

Finally, the notions of appreciation and recognition by others as a result of knowledge sharing are salient in the data.

*"They [knowledge managers] write a small notice in our weekly letter, like this week Darius has contributed with the purchase agreement. Then it's like a gold star, everyone is seeing like ok, he or she is always contributing, that's a good image, internal image." (Darius)*

*"I think it has to be appreciated by your seniors, and as I said, I hope they appreciate it, ... otherwise, it will be like, ok, I don't give a damn about it. So that's important, that it would be appreciated." (Darius)*

While the previous two quotes refer to this recognition being expressed by seniors and knowledge managers, the following quotes, by contrast, portray the appreciation from colleagues with whom the knowledge is shared.

*“Everyone helps each other and I really feel that people appreciate when you take the time and share information.” (Kostas)*

*“I will probably be a very appreciated colleague, I guess. If you share what you know and don’t have it for yourself. Because I think that it’s very important when you work in teams like we do that you share and not have it for yourself, just because you yourself are going to be better than everybody else. And that you share is much more important.” (Rasa)*

Interestingly, Rasa theoretically recognises how withholding knowledge would make her become better, which points to knowledge sharing as resulting in a loss of power. On the other hand, though, at the same time, she distances herself from this notion of power as being lost, which is outweighed by the importance of sharing knowledge which prevails in the firm.

The following quote, furthermore, illustrates the importance of having a recipient interested in the shared knowledge.

*“Everyone could become better in doing it [sharing knowledge], but it also has to have a recipient. And for me, it is very important, that the recipient is really interested.” (Milda)*

Thus, the willingness to share knowledge appears to be induced by the feeling of receiving appreciation, recognition and interest for the shared knowledge, by seniors, knowledge managers or colleagues.

Similarly, knowledge sharing leads to a higher self-esteem - a positive feeling towards oneself by helping others, an ego boost - and, subsequently, increased willingness to engage in knowledge sharing.

*“And when you go out and you can see, oh [claps her hands] I can help, oh! Then you can get like... an ego boost, a good feeling... of feeling important. Of course, that is very important to feel important.” (Marija)*

*“If you have invented the new wheel, so to say, then I can feel it’s good to like, I would save my colleagues from this nightmare, so ‘please, take these documents or whatever, instead of putting those boring hours that I have spent’. So that’s a good... good feeling.” (Darius)*

Overall, these drivers that appear as most pronounced throughout all interviews - self-interest, 'doing a good job', appreciation and self-esteem - can be related to the background of understanding professionals' willingness, based on their power and identification within the work context, which constitute the conceptual framework of our thesis. We further discuss our findings throughout the following chapter and, finally, revisit the conceptual framework in section 5.4.

## 5. Discussion

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In this chapter, we discuss our empirical data presented in Chapter 4, by putting it in the context of the conceptual framework of our thesis. In particular, we discuss professionals' perception of knowledge sharing as well as how their willingness to share knowledge can be understood in relation to power and identification within the work context.

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### 5.1. 'There is no winner in this, there are winners'

In the frame of our study, it crystallises how the lawyers simultaneously identify with both their organisation and their profession. Even though the professionals' organisational identification is more pronounced than their identification with their profession, *'there is no winner in this, there are winners.'* Both these salient targets of identification, moreover, do not exist in isolation, but appear as strongly intertwined and combined to a certain extent (Ashforth et al., 2008), thereby reinforcing one another and jointly inducing professionals' willingness to share knowledge in PSFs.

On the one hand, the lawyers we study clearly attribute specific, and commonly referred to, characteristics to themselves: learning and development, excellence and perfection, and competitiveness. Thus, in line with Vough's (2012) notion of a professional ideal, their understanding of what it means to be a lawyer seems to be aligned, and their self-view corresponds with their perceived professional ideal. More precisely, there appears a strong feeling of exclusivity - distinctiveness from others - and sameness within the group of lawyers (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004; Vough, 2012) through this professional identification. Even though not all the lawyers initially aimed for pursuing such career, they commonly refer to a feeling of community and belonging between the professional group of lawyers. Thus, this professional identification seemingly emerges while becoming a professional lawyer.

On the other hand, given that the PSF displays elevated homogeneity in terms of professional workforce (Alvesson, 2004), this professional identification appears not to harm individuals' identification with the organisation. Likewise, it is this homogeneity that enables the state of combining of both these identifications of the lawyers. Even though the lawyers strongly identify with their profession, their organisational identification is even more pronounced than the former. Besides frequently using the words 'we' and 'us' and emphasising their satisfaction with their law firms (Dutton et al., 1994), it is especially the lawyers' repeated

referrals to benefits for the firm as a whole (Van Knippenberg, 2000), brought about through knowledge sharing, that support this impression.

### ***Becoming Better Through Knowledge Sharing***

The strong learning orientation, as well as the desire to always keep improving and become better, unite the lawyers and induces their willingness to share knowledge. This can be seen as directly linked to their strongly pronounced perception of knowledge sharing as ‘teaching and learning’, especially in a top-down manner, that is, from the more experienced to the more junior lawyers. Thus, it is the strong learning orientation as part of the professional ideal, that induces the professionals’ willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. This is in line with Jonsson (2013), who highlights the importance of learning and, especially, of learning the profession, in the context of knowledge sharing. This element of learning, in turn, appears as further embedded in professional work and the PSF context in general, and ingrained in the apprenticeship model and professionals’ collaboration (Adler, 2008; Greenwood & Empson, 2003; Styhre, 2011). It is also through knowledge sharing, in terms of ‘teaching and learning’, that the lawyers establish, uphold and reinforce the autonomy that, as professionals, they require in their working environment (Angel, 2007; Empson, 2007).

In turn, willingness, as understood through professionals’ desire to learn and develop, is displayed as serving their self-interest. Moreover, it is through learning and becoming better that the lawyers seek for perfection and excellence, which constitutes another part of their perceived professional ideal. The striving for excellence, in turn, is both in their self-interest, as well as it constitutes a business need, in terms of being able to ‘do a good job’ for the client. This understanding of knowledge sharing as a business need (Styhre, 2011) which, in turn, induces professionals’ willingness to share knowledge, is further strengthened by appreciating that clients are entitled to the knowledge of the whole firm, and not only of individual lawyers, as pointed out by the knowledge manager of Ilaf & Partners. In addition, it is in combination with lawyers’ perception or expectations of reciprocity (Bock et al., 2005; Gao & Riley, 2010), where the provision of knowledge to others is likely to result in receiving knowledge in return. Thus, lawyers’ apparently inherent desire to learn, develop, become better and do a good - or excellent - job for the client appears to be fulfilled through knowledge sharing.

### ***Making Mistakes is less Professional, more Human***

Interestingly, while excellence and perfectionism likewise crystallise as part of lawyers’ ideal, these professionals simultaneously distance themselves from this view, with regard to the

notion of making mistakes. It appears that, while as a professional one is not allowed to make mistakes, it is because every lawyer, in the end, is human, that mistakes become acceptable. This conveys the impression that, on the one hand, being a human is portrayed as the counterexample of being a professional, as well as it, on the other hand, demonstrates how the lawyers are somehow distancing themselves from this element of the professional ideal. Similarly, Vough (2012) suggests that professionals tend to identify less with unfavourable characteristics, thereby partially distancing themselves from their profession. Hence, we could speak of a certain degree of dis-identification - “an active but negative connection” (Brown, 2017, p.299) - between the self and the profession, at least partially.

Nonetheless, little sharing of mistakes seems to occur on a firm level. This unwillingness of lawyers to openly address mistakes points to how the lawyers may, contrary to what they affirm, identify with the notion of perfectionism and thus more with the profession. In this respect, although sharing mistakes may be in the organisation’s interest, as it may prevent colleagues from making similar mistakes, the lawyers refrain from doing so across the firm. It appears that making mistakes is not compatible with acting “in a professional manner” (Jonsson, 2013, p.71). Thus, the lawyers seem to act in a way that best serves the profession’s interest, thereby likewise intending to maintain and keep up with the professional ideal of excellence and perfection. Based on the idea of acting in a way that favours the target of identification (Van Knippenberg, 2000), this points to a salient professional identification.

In the same context, surprisingly, a recurring theme is the emergent practice of sharing mistakes within the workgroup, instead of the firm as a whole. Even though the organisation and the workgroup are different targets of identification, both are organisationally situated and belong to the same category (Atewologun et al., 2017). Thus, lawyers’ repeated referral to sharing mistakes on the workgroup-level points not only to a strong identification with the workgroup but, by the same, hints to overall identification with the organisation. In contrast to concerns that such focus on the workgroup-level may inhibit knowledge transfer across a firm (Argote & Ingram, 2000), the lawyers declare seamless communication and possible collaboration between the different workgroups within the firm, when necessary. Moreover, sharing mistakes within the workgroups is still portrayed as being in the interest of the firm as a whole and, as Ilaf & Partner’s knowledge advisor points out, it is in line with the firm’s general emphasis on the importance of sharing mistakes.



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*Sharing is Caring*

The lawyers we study appear to strongly identify with the organisation they work for. In particular, they commonly refer to 'we' and 'us' as a firm, as well as they emphasise their satisfaction with their law firms (Dutton et al., 1994). Moreover, what the lawyers highlight is the idea of helping each other and collaborating, instead of competing internally.

Lawyers portray their satisfaction with the firms they work for through both the size of the firm, which allows for every lawyer to be perceived as an individual and facilitates closer relationships and collaboration between colleagues, and a feeling of pride concerning the achievements and knowledge of a firm of such size. As professionals, the lawyers seek to collaborate and interact with others, which allows them to both learn and become better, and maintain their legitimacy (Styhre, 2011). It appears that the atmosphere and culture of the law firms - acknowledging how identification and culture are intertwined (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) - are aligned with such professional work. The lawyers' identification with the organisation, in turn, is based on their idea that it is same attributes - collaboration and teamwork - that define both themselves and the firm (Dutton et al., 1994). Moreover, the lawyers frequently refer to how the entire firm benefits from their knowledge sharing, which further hints at lawyers' organisational identification (see also Van Knippenberg, 2000).

Regarding knowledge sharing and the lawyers' own perspective on their willingness to engage in such, they constantly highlight how this is beneficial for the colleagues and the firm, as both become better and are able to successfully serve the clients. Moreover, as it is the aim of a PSF to provide top quality service to the clients (Maister, 2003), acting in such way further underlines the lawyer's identification with the organisation. Thus, the willingness to share knowledge is displayed through 'doing a good job' - for the client directly, or in terms of assisting colleagues - and thus as a business need. Surprisingly, the same ideas that relate to the previously discussed professional identification - learning and 'doing a good job' for the client - crystallise here, which hints at the combining of both identifications (Ashforth et al., 2008). However, it is with regard to the organisation that lawyers' identification appears most pronounced, given that the sharing of knowledge by the lawyers is portrayed as being in the firm's best interest (see also Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Kalling & Styhre, 2003). Lawyers' willingness to share their knowledge thus directly connects to acting in a way that is beneficial for their target of identification, that is, the organisation (Van Knippenberg, 2000).

In contrast to Alvesson's (2004) suggestion that knowledge workers may identify more strongly with their profession than with their firm, this tendency does not become apparent in our empirical data. Instead, lawyers' identification with the organisation appears more salient than their identification with the profession. In this context, it stands out how only one lawyer refers to the Bar Association as the lawyers' professional association, while everyone touches upon their firm. It seems that the lawyers are 'locals' rather than 'cosmopolitans' which means that, instead of identifying solely with their profession, they likewise adapt to the organisation they work for (Heil et al., 2000).

### ***Competition? Not Here***

With regard to competitiveness which is portrayed as part of lawyers' ideal, the professionals seem to adapt to the firm, organised as a true partnership wherein the element of sharing is ingrained (Empson, 2007). Thus, competitive behaviour does not occur among the co-workers within the firms we study. It appears that lawyers' understanding of this part of their professional role is influenced by their organisational identification (see also Empson, 2004), whereby this competitive element is directed outwards the firm. Internally, instead, what crystallises are the ideas of 'we', 'helping each other' and '*there is no winner in this, there are winners.*' By identifying with the organisation, the lawyers identify with the collective of their colleagues, thus acting in a way that is most beneficial for them (Van Knippenberg, 2000), that is, providing their knowledge to their colleagues. Consequently, it becomes apparent how organisational identification induces professionals' willingness to share knowledge with one another.

Finally, lawyers' strong organisational identification is likewise demonstrated by their repeated referrals to the idea '*yes, but not here*'. In this line, though theoretically recognising the existence of motives that would make one not share knowledge, interviewees repeatedly refer to how, in their firm, such refraining behaviour would not be suitable. Thus, it seems that their self-view relies on their membership in the firm (Brown, 2017). Given that the firm's culture favours knowledge sharing, the lawyers have adopted the understandings present in the firm, which is their target of identification, as well as they appear to define themselves in a way that they consider describes the organisation (Dutton et al., 1994). This identification with the organisation is further underlined by the lawyers distancing themselves from environments in which people do not share knowledge, as they believe is the case in other firms.

Ultimately, *'there is no winner in this, there are winners'*, both when it comes to identifying with different targets simultaneously, as well as regarding the sharing of knowledge, which benefits the organisation as a whole. As we discuss in the following section, knowledge sharing does not prejudice the person who shares but, rather, on the contrary, it is through the act of sharing that knowledge becomes visible, thus potentially adding to the power, value and influence which the professional has in the firm.

## **5.2. 'That is very important to feel important'**

The notion of power appears as contradictory when it comes to lawyers' knowledge sharing behaviour. Even though the lawyers recognise the coercive connotation of power in the law firm as a hierarchical organisation, it is their understanding of knowledge as power that appears inconsistent between various professionals. While one view considers that knowledge loses the notion of power when being shared, it is - in contrast - the understanding of power as being gained through making the knowledge and expertise visible to others, that prevails and consequently induces lawyers' willingness to share their knowledge. Mysteriously, though, despite these diverse understandings of power and the possible loss or gain thereof through knowledge sharing, the tendency to engage in such behaviour is displayed by the clear majority of professionals.

### ***Knowledge is What Matters***

Initially, the lawyers portray power in its coercive connotation, which is based on the hierarchical structure of the organisation and used as a force of an individual in a senior position over the junior one due to the authority of the former (Gordon & Grant, 2004). They view upon hierarchy as a necessity in the day-to-day business and decision-making. Moreover, the professionals perceive it as ingrained in the very way the law firm functions, for example, the formal responsibility of the partner for the decisions made by associates, as prescribed by norms and regulations of the Bar Association. However, when asked to relate power to knowledge, the lawyers partially distance themselves from power in its coercive sense or, as Chan (2000, cited in Kärreman, 2010) defines it, 'power over', and give examples of how expert knowledge in a particular area assigns power also to junior lawyers in form of higher influence when making decisions. Instead of power relying solely on hierarchy, knowledge seems to facilitate the coexistence of both horizontal and vertical forms of authority (Lundholm et al., 2012). Interestingly, both senior and junior lawyers independently express the view that the expert knowledge which one holds, alters the way the traditional

hierarchical law firm functions, as expert knowledge puts the individual in a slightly superior position, regardless of their formal rank in the firm. Hence, knowledge appears to provide more authority than a formal senior position, thus implying that knowledge is a source of power and influence (Alvesson, 2004; Kärreman, 2010).

Further hints to the notion of knowledge as power become salient when lawyers refer to the sharing of knowledge as a loss of the power that lies with this knowledge (see also Hislop, 2005, cited in Kelly, 2007; Starbuck, 1992; Wang & Noe, 2010). However, at the same time, these professionals themselves admit that this should not be the way of thinking in this firm. This perception of losing power through knowledge sharing, though, is only faintly displayed in our empirical data. In contrast, the lawyers predominantly refer to knowledge sharing as having a completely opposite effect to losing power, that is, not only maintaining power despite sharing but even gaining power through making their knowledge and expertise visible to others. Apparently, the lawyers' willingness to share knowledge is not substantially hindered by the fear to lose the power that lies with the knowledge, but rather is this willingness induced, since making knowledge visible through sharing it, brings recognition to the one who shares (see also Hislop, 2005, cited in Kelly, 2007; Wang and Noe, 2010). Further, as significant drivers to engage in knowledge sharing, the lawyers refer to an ego boost and good feeling of being important - pointing to increased self-esteem - which they experience when they help their colleagues, as well as to appreciation and recognition by others.

### ***Gaining Through Sharing***

As our empirical data demonstrates, the desire for recognition for knowledge sharing far outweighs the fear to lose power for the same reason, which is why the lawyers choose to share their knowledge. Interestingly, the overall picture of our study suggests that the willingness to share knowledge in general, and the notions of appreciation, recognition and self-esteem in particular, cannot be detached from the lawyers' identification with the firm, since their interest in the benefit of the entire organisation and in receiving appreciation within the firm is strongly pronounced. Appreciation and recognition, in turn, are shown for sharing knowledge and making it both visible and available to others in the firm, and not for having knowledge.

On the one hand, the notion of professionalism and lawyers' identification with the profession, through the underlying norms (Nordenflycht, 2010) and regulations imposed by the Bar Association (Jonsson, 2013), induce professionals in PSFs to act in a professional

way. This need to be professional, part of which is knowledge sharing (see also Jonsson, 2013), likewise comes up in our empirical material, as otherwise the lawyers ‘get kicked out of the Bar Association.’ On the other hand, lawyers’ professional identification, combined with their high level of expertise, autonomous working style and their elevated authority as knowledge workers in the firm (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2009) in part can also explain their fear to lose this superior position, and thus power, through knowledge sharing (Bock et al., 2005; Wang & Noe, 2010). This is especially so if knowledge is considered by the individual as part of their professional identity (Gao & Riley, 2010). However, in our empirical material, lawyers seem to regard knowledge sharing very positively and are predominantly willing to engage in such behaviour. Hence, it appears that their professional identification does not primarily rely on their knowledge or, put in another way, it does not rely on unique expert knowledge. Concerning lawyers’ expert status as strongly shaping their perception as professionals (Empson, 2007), our empirical material conveys the impression that the expert status lies with the workgroup, and barely resides in an individual lawyer. In contrast to the desire to specialise and become a unique expert within the firm, the lawyers we study put more emphasis on knowledge sharing. However, we still find the notion of “expert professionalism” (Brint, 1994, cited in Styhre, 2011, p.17), as knowledge sharing does not rule out the existence of an expert status altogether, but rather extends it to the workgroup level.

We argue that it is the professionals’ strong identification with the organisation that balances out the perceived negative effects of knowledge as power, which would induce unwillingness rather than willingness to provide knowledge to others. As previously discussed, the lawyers clearly express this identification with the firm through the absence of internal competition, a close connection to both their workgroups and the whole firm, as well as a perception of the firm’s business interests as their own. Since the lawyers strongly identify with their respective firms, they are willing to act in the best interest of the firm (Van Knippenberg, 2000), that is, share their knowledge despite potential risks of losing uniqueness, value and influence. In other words, organisational identification counterbalances such potentially perceived loss of power through knowledge sharing and strengthens the perception of gaining power precisely through the sharing of knowledge.

#### ***Carrot, not Stick - People, not Systems***

The previously discussed notions of appreciation and increased self-esteem through knowledge sharing affect professionals’ willingness to share knowledge via underlying

motivational factors. In line with McGregor's (1960) Theory Y, it is humans' desire for reputation and self-esteem that acts as motivating factor. This becomes salient in our empirical data, as appreciation is referred to as inducing the willingness to share knowledge. Hereby, though, the recognition can come from both colleagues or a more formal counterpart, such as partners or knowledge managers. Moreover, this appreciation and recognition for knowledge sharing relates to, and potentially adds to, knowledge workers experiencing elevated esteem due to their knowledge and expertise (Alvesson, 2004). The importance of recognition for sharing knowledge likewise resembles the understandings transmitted by knowledge managers of major business law firms in Sweden, who refer to the use of *'the carrot rather than the stick'*. In line with McGregor's (1960) motivation theory, control - the stick - does not serve to motivate the lawyers to share knowledge, but it is the carrot, in terms of receiving recognition and appreciation, that induces knowledge sharing behaviour. Interestingly, from the empirical material, it appears that solving legal problems by itself presents a motivator – carrot - for lawyers who identify with their profession.

In clear contrast to the desire for self-esteem, though, the firms' knowledge systems and databases do not seem to foster lawyers' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. In line with Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), IT systems consequently appear as a hygiene factor, thus not altering the lawyers' state of motivation, but - by contrast - a lack of these databases and knowledge tools would negatively affect their work. Based on our document analysis, it appears pertinent to comment that the systems convey the impression of utility and user-friendliness. However, the lawyers are not necessarily unsatisfied with the quality of the tools - though some express concerns - but they rather have become used to having these tools. Consequently, the mere availability of such systems does not have an impact on lawyers' willingness to share knowledge (see also Jonsson, 2013).

In connection herewith, the perception of knowledge sharing in terms of discussing and a focus on people clearly outweighs the referrals to the firms' knowledge databases. Thus, the databases appear to be something that lawyers do not actively think about - even less than about knowledge sharing in general. This emphasis on people rather than technology is further underlined by the importance placed on having a recipient who is interested in the knowledge being shared, as illustrated in our empirical material. Similarly, even after knowledge has been shared, the person providing knowledge is likely to be contacted by colleagues in this regard, to obtain further insights into the topic. This displays how the sharing of knowledge does not imply a loss of power, in terms of value and influence, as co-workers still contact the sharer and ask for his/her advice and expertise (Morris & Empson, 1998). Nonetheless,

even though knowledge sharing appears to be commonly and willingly practiced by the professionals, the presence of sporadic moments of unwillingness cannot be neglected and likewise deserve some further consideration.

### 5.3. 'But it might not be easy'

The lawyers in our study - consciously or not - demonstrate some moments of unwillingness to share their knowledge, despite their pronounced positive attitude towards knowledge sharing. These moments relate to professionals' lack of time to engage in knowledge sharing and a particular type of knowledge gained through negative experiences, that is, mistakes.

Firstly, lack of time to engage in knowledge sharing is strongly salient in every interview and likewise is regarded as a general barrier for sharing knowledge (e.g. Razmerita et al., 2016; Szulanski, 1996, cited in Kalling & Styhre, 2003). Interestingly, the lawyers mostly consider lack of time as a hindering circumstance when they refer to knowledge sharing outside the scope of their daily work, for instance, sharing knowledge that is not immediately related to the recipient's specialisation or interest. In contradiction, though, lawyers acknowledge the potential of knowledge sharing to help saving time in the future, as preventing them from '*reinventing the wheel every time*' - a metaphor used by several lawyers independently. Similarly, the notion of helping others, that is, 'doing a good job' for the colleagues, which as well is a part of lawyers' identification with the organisation, seems to counterbalance the lack of time as hindering from knowledge sharing. It crystallises how lawyers are willing to allocate time to support their co-workers - especially when directly asked (Tangaraja et al., 2016) - and to educate junior colleagues, which is also embedded in the apprenticeship model (e.g. Greenwood & Empson, 2003; Jonsson, 2013; Maister, 2003).

Secondly, another moment of unwillingness to share knowledge portrayed by the lawyers is their reluctance to make known and openly address their mistakes across the firm, despite acknowledging that such negative experience can become a valuable source of learning for others. As previously discussed, the lawyers prefer to share mistakes within the workgroup they belong to, but tend to refrain from doing so organisation-wide. By sharing mistakes across the firm, lawyers' status and reputation may be damaged (Bock et al., 2005), and by the same, their power, influence and value in the firm may diminish, which is what appears to induce lawyers' unwillingness to openly discuss their mistakes on a firm level. Nonetheless, these moments of unwillingness do not convey the impression of substantially inhibiting professionals' knowledge sharing behaviour within the law firms.

#### 5.4. ‘It wasn’t crystal clear for me’ or Framework for the Thesis Revisited

In this section, we connect our findings - how lawyers’ willingness to share knowledge is displayed through the ideas of self-interest, ‘doing a good job’, and appreciation and self-esteem - to the conceptual framework of our thesis. In other words, we further explain how this displayed willingness of lawyers to share knowledge can be understood in relation to their power and their identification with organisation and profession and, thereby, we extend our conceptual framework (Figure 3).

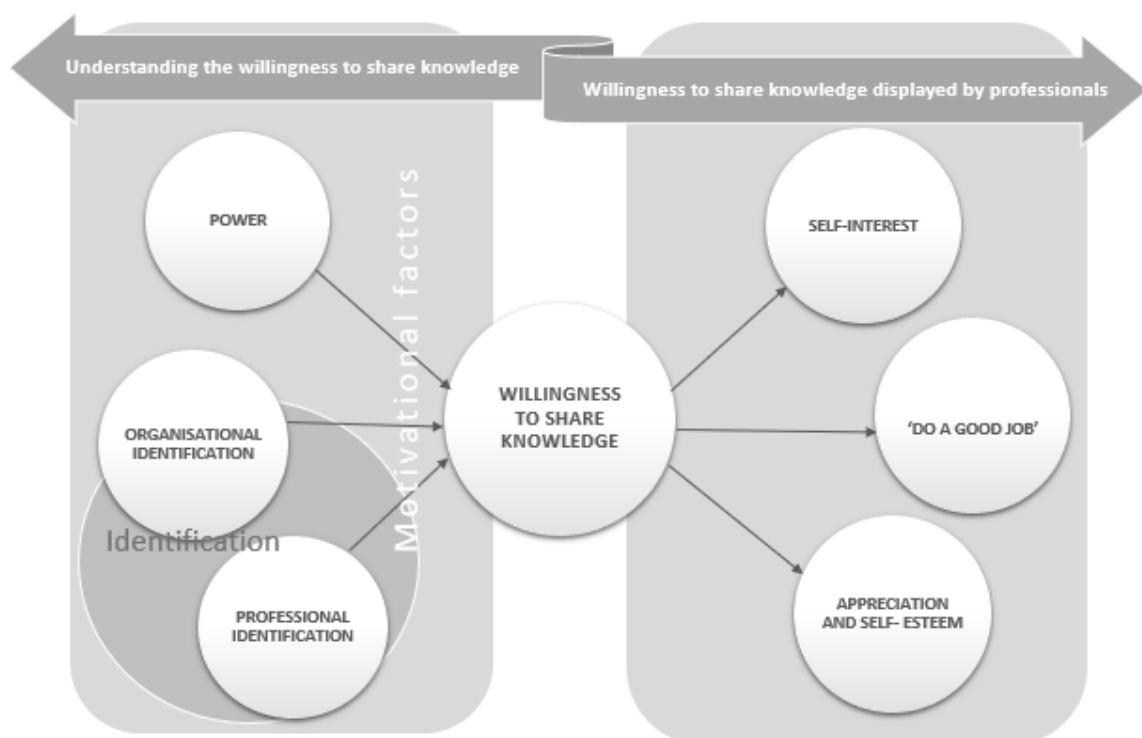


Figure 3: Conceptual Framework Revisited - Willingness to share knowledge

#### *Self-interest*

The lawyers in our study commonly portray their willingness to engage in knowledge sharing as their self-interest. Our interpretation of this self-interest as inducing professionals’ willingness to share knowledge allows understanding this willingness in relation to both their identification within the work context and their power.

From previous research, it becomes apparent how lawyers’ strong identification with their profession, as a general tendency that professionals develop (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2004; Styhre, 2011; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015), potentially leads to refraining from knowledge sharing, especially when considering knowledge as part of the professional identity (Gao and Riley, 2010). The self-interest, to which the professionals we study refer, indeed connects to



their strong professional identification. However, the lawyers rather attribute to their professional ideal (Vough, 2012) such qualities as striving for excellence, continuous learning, development and improvement. In turn, the lawyers perceive knowledge sharing as enabling them to achieve these qualities. In this context, the element of reciprocity (Bock et al, 2005; Gao & Riley, 2010), where one shares knowledge with the expectation that the co-workers would do the same, likewise links to professional identification and the constant aspiration for learning. It is through obtaining knowledge from other professionals, that one is able to develop and improve (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Empson, 2007; Styhre, 2011). Thus, the lawyers' perception of knowledge sharing as 'teaching and learning' facilitates understanding their willingness to engage in knowledge sharing.

However, the lawyers demonstrate an even more pronounced identification with the organisation they work for. The possibility of having multiple targets or foci of identification is widely acknowledged (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017; Vough, 2012), and the lawyers we study - professionals with a clearly pronounced professional identification - simultaneously identify with both profession and organisation, whereby the latter is stronger. Thus, the lawyers understand themselves as part of the organisation, and consequently are willing to share their knowledge for the benefit of the firm. Interestingly, organisational identification of the lawyers reaches the extent at which they view a benefit of the firm, brought about through knowledge sharing, as their self-interest.

As previously discussed, the lawyers recognise the notion of knowledge as a source of power and influence within the firm, and, consequently, their elevated value for the firm (Alvesson et al., 2015; Kärreman, 2010; Newell et al., 2009). However, in our study, it appears that lawyers' strong organisational identification, combined with the notion of reciprocity, redirects the self-interest in retaining knowledge towards sharing it with others. Since sharing knowledge does not diminish the lawyers' power but rather augments it (see also Wang & Noe, 2010), as the knowledge, and thus the power, become visible through sharing, this understanding of power makes knowledge sharing be in the lawyers' self-interest, thus inducing their willingness to share.

### ***'Doing a good job'***

The notion of 'doing a good job', as a second idea whereupon lawyers base their willingness to share knowledge, appears very pronounced and connects to the main assets of the professionals - their knowledge and relationships with clients (Maister, 2003). Further, 'doing a good job' lends itself to multiple interpretations in terms of the willingness to share

knowledge, based on both their identification within the work context and the power the professionals have in the firm.

Lawyers' identification with the firm induces their willingness to share knowledge, as they perceive this sharing to be a meaningful contribution to 'doing a good job' for a client, which is an ultimate goal of the law firm (Empson, 2007; Maister, 2003). In our empirical data 'doing a good job' as a team, though, has a highly pronounced notion of helping others. Interestingly, this notion of help differs from Styhre's (2011) argument that professionals do not engage in knowledge sharing for the purpose of supporting their co-workers, but rather view it as a necessity to perform their work properly. Our interpretation is that it is lawyers' identification with the organisation and its goals, which they perceive as their own, that induces their willingness to share the knowledge. The notion of 'doing a good job', however, cannot be entirely disconnected from lawyers' professional identification, since the lawyers as professionals are continuously striving for excellence. In order to reach the level of, and constantly reinforce the professional ideal (Vough, 2012), one has to 'do a good job.' Furthermore, it also links to the professional role in terms of the apprenticeship model (Empson, 2007; Jonsson, 2013), by teaching the junior colleagues and learning from the more experienced ones, both in order to ultimately 'do a good job' for the client.

Strikingly, we note a reverse connection to power in this context - in order to 'do a good job', lawyers relinquish the power that knowledge gives them, and share their knowledge as - according to Ilaf & Partners' knowledge manager - '*the clients are entitled to collective expertise of the firm.*' The dominant connotation of power among the lawyers is that power is gained through sharing and 'doing a good job', thereby leading to mutual appreciation and recognition. The idea of 'doing a good job' is likewise connected to motivational factors (Heil et al., 2000; McGregor, 1960; Herzberg et al., 1959), as awareness of creating value for the clients and helping co-workers leads to one's elevated self-esteem and reputation in the firm.

### ***Appreciation and self-esteem***

Appreciation and self-esteem, as the third facet in which the willingness to share knowledge is displayed by the lawyers, is closely related to motivational factors through the needs for self-esteem and reputation (Heil et al., 2000; McGregor, 1960). We further argue how appreciation and self-esteem, as linked to willingness to share knowledge, are intertwined with professionals' organisational and professional identification, as well as connected to the notion of power.

On the one hand, on an organisational level, lawyers receive the desired appreciation through sharing their knowledge, as they are viewed as more appreciated colleagues by their co-workers. Thus, the lawyers enjoy a higher reputation and earn respect in the firm. Likewise, their self-esteem, in terms of self-confidence and self-respect, is elevated by experiencing a '*good feeling of being important.*' On the other hand, recognition received from their seniors or the partners of the firm, seems to boost lawyers' ego as professionals, a special 'species'. The desire for self-esteem and reputation (Heil et al., 2000; McGregor, 2006) thus serves as a motivator and induces the lawyers' willingness to share knowledge.

Finally, our empirical data demonstrates how appreciation and self-esteem likewise connect to power through the visibility of knowledge. To become a source of power, knowledge needs to become visible to others (Hislop 2005, cited in Kelly, 2007), and the latter is achieved through knowledge sharing. Moreover, with the visibility of knowledge comes appreciation from the co-workers and increased influence of the professional who shares knowledge. Knowledge sharing does not eliminate further involvement of the sharer in the process of using that knowledge (see also Morris & Empson, 1998), given that the knowledge is more helpful in context and practice, thus reinforcing the value and power of the individual who shares the knowledge.

## 6. Conclusion

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In this chapter, we conclude our thesis by presenting our research contribution to the existing literature. We further outline the limitations of our study and provide practical implications as well as our suggestions for further research.

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### 6.1. Research Contribution

With our thesis, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of professionals' perspective and perception of knowledge sharing, as well as their willingness to share knowledge in PSFs. We, therefore, posed the following research questions:

- How do professionals perceive knowledge sharing in their daily work?
- How can the professionals' willingness to share knowledge be understood, in relation to their power and identification within the work context?

Our research illustrates how professionals do not actively think about and reflect upon knowledge sharing on a daily basis. Rather, knowledge sharing is perceived as inherent to their work and, thus, as professional work practice (Styhre, 2011). Further, besides an elevated emphasis on knowledge sharing through collaboration and interaction, rather than systems and databases, it is specifically the idea of 'teaching and learning' that dominates in professionals' perception of knowledge sharing. Professionals' willingness to share knowledge, in turn, shall be understood in connection with their perspective and perception of knowledge sharing.

In this line, our thesis contributes to the knowledge sharing literature, with a special focus on the individual perspective of the professionals in PSFs and their willingness to share knowledge. For the purpose of our study, we combined existing research on both identification and power with the literature on knowledge sharing. We further integrated underlying motivational factors, thereby crossing the bridge between the seldom jointly investigated areas of knowledge sharing and motivational factors (Wang & Noe, 2010).

We observe the coexistence of lawyers' identification with both their profession and the organisation they work for (Ashforth et al., 2008; Atewologun et al., 2017; Brown, 2017). Professional identification facilitates knowledge sharing through professionals' strong learning orientation and striving for excellence, complemented by the notion of reciprocity.

Organisational identification, for its part, leads professionals to perceive the firm's interest in knowledge sharing as their own. Both these identifications appear to not only coexist, but combine to a certain extent (Ashforth et al., 2008) and in combination induce professionals' willingness to share their knowledge. Surprisingly, while our study demonstrates how the professionals identify strongly with their profession, however, in contradiction to previous research (see Alvesson, 2004), they even more strongly identify with their organisation. Our thesis thereby contributes to the "identification with" research (Hatch & Schultz, 2000), and likewise illuminates how professionals' organisational identification shapes their understanding of their professional role.

We further contribute to the research on knowledge sharing in PSFs, by illustrating how the notion of professionals' power in the firm induces, rather than hinders knowledge sharing behaviour. In knowledge-intensive contexts, as is the context of a PSF, knowledge becomes a source of power (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson et al., 2015; Newell et al., 2009), which may be both enabling and hindering individual-level knowledge sharing (Hislop, 2005, cited in Kelly, 2007; Wang & Noe, 2010). The contribution we make, in this respect, lies in showing how, due to their identification with the organisation, professionals' understanding of knowledge as a source of power does not inhibit their willingness to share knowledge. By contrast, power is not lost through sharing knowledge, but increases when knowledge becomes visible through sharing, and thus augments professionals' willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. With regard to underlying motivational factors, what crystallises are both reputation, in terms of appreciation, and elevated self-esteem (Herzberg et al., 1959; McGregor, 1960), as strongly inducing professionals' knowledge sharing behaviour.

Ultimately, we extend the conceptual framework of our thesis for understanding the willingness to share knowledge, by illustrating how the willingness to share knowledge is displayed by the professionals in terms of serving their self-interest, enabling them to '*do a good job*' and leading to increased appreciation and self-esteem. In our thesis, we show how the aforementioned ideas, which crystallise from the empirical material of our study, connect back to and facilitate understanding the professionals' willingness to share knowledge, in relation to their power and identification within the work context.

## **6.2. Research Limitations**

As every research, our study is subject to certain limitations, most of which we addressed in the methodology chapter of this paper. These limitations include potentially too positive

connotations attached to knowledge, which may have directed responses of the interviewees towards ‘socially desired’ ones (Fontana & Frey, 1994). For the same reason, the lawyers we interviewed may have highlighted positive aspects related to knowledge and knowledge sharing, while omitting more embarrassing ones (Alvesson, 2003). Further, we acknowledge the ambiguity of knowledge as a concept, and thus the variety of ways in which the professionals may understand it as well as potential difficulties to verbally express ideas on knowledge and the sharing thereof (Styhre, 2011).

As our research is based on a qualitative method, it is *per se* not aimed at the generalisation of our findings towards a wider population (e.g. Bryman, 2012; Farquhar, 2012). Since we studied a specific category of knowledge workers, that is, professionals, we thus acknowledge that our findings do not apply to the overall group of knowledge workers. However, the outcomes of our research are transferable to other PSF contexts (Tracy, 2010).

### **6.3. Practical Implications**

From a practical point of view, our study points to appreciating the interdependencies between both professional and organisational identification. On the one hand, when an organisation and its culture favour knowledge sharing behaviour, it is through individuals’ identification with the organisation that their willingness to share knowledge can be further understood and increased. However, a strongly pronounced identification with the profession, on the other hand, does not seem to hinder knowledge sharing *per se*, as such behaviour is likewise embedded in the professional role. This understanding may facilitate a greater acceptance of simultaneously identifying with multiple targets, without feeling torn between either profession or organisation. Moreover, as our study has shown, sharing knowledge does not imply losing power but, on the contrary, rather leads to a gain thereof through making knowledge visible and receiving appreciation, recognition and elevated self-esteem. This, in turn, also relates to motivational factors, which appear as inducing the willingness to engage in knowledge sharing, thus pointing to a potential need for organisations to rethink the incentives aimed at inducing such behaviour. Ultimately, the perceived unwillingness to share mistakes on a firm level may, in a practical context, hint at the necessity of a more thorough consideration thereof.

#### **6.4. Implications for Further Research**

Given the trend in previous research to focus on the organisational rather than the individual perspective of knowledge sharing, we suggest more research on the individual perception, as ultimately knowledge sharing is voluntary behaviour and cannot be detached from the individuals engaging in it. Especially, we perceive a need to focus on professionals, as their distinctive characteristics, such as their work autonomy, elevated power and identification with the profession, point against transferring findings from contexts other than the PSFs. Furthermore, research on individual-level knowledge sharing would benefit from studies deliberately viewing upon professionals' unwillingness to share mistakes across the firm as a whole. Finally, it appears pertinent to conduct further in-depth research specifically on power and the notion of knowledge as a source of power, as - based on our findings - knowledge as power seems to have different connotations even within the same organisational and professional context.

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## Appendix

### *Anonymised list of interviewees: Lawyers*

<i>#</i>	<i>Name (Fictive)</i>	<i>Seniority</i>
1	Marius	Partner
2	Milda	Partner
3	Jonas	Partner
4	Rokas	Senior/Managing Associate
5	Marija	Senior/Managing Associate
6	Laima	Senior/Managing Associate
7	Kostas	Associate
8	Ona	Associate
9	Rasa	Associate
10	Darius	Associate
11	Pranas	Associate

*Table 1: Anonymised list of interviewees*

In addition to the interviews with lawyers, which constitute the key of our research interest, single interviews with two knowledge managers as well as the attendance of a knowledge managers' network meeting and a document analysis of the firms' knowledge databases and tools serve to provide further insights in terms of context of the business and topic of interest.