

Leaders' After-hours Electronic Communication Expectations and Employees' Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

Actively meeting the expectations of leaders to be “in touch” and “responsive” during off-hours is a new type of workplace survival rule for employees in the era of the digital economy. The study explores the “double-edged sword” effect of leaders' after-hours electronic communication expectations (AECE) on subordinates' knowledge management behaviors and the boundary conditions based on affective event theory from the view of emotions. This exploration utilizes both an experimental study and a multi-time point field study. The results indicate that for employees with a high level of perspective-taking competence, AECE stimulates deep acting, consequently enhancing employees' knowledge-sharing behaviors. Conversely, for employee with low perspective-taking competence, AECE triggers surface acting, leading to an increase in knowledge-hiding behaviors. The findings provide a more comprehensive explanation of the differential impact of AECE on subordinates' knowledge management behaviors, which enriches the existing literature on AECE, extends the application of affective event theory in the context of enterprises' digital transformation, and provides insights for organizations to effectively implement and manage AECE in the evolving landscape of workplace dynamics, often referred to as the “new normal”.

KEYWORDS

After-hours electronic communication expectations; Perspective-taking; Emotional labor; Knowledge sharing behavior; Knowledge hiding behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

The swift evolution of the digital economy era has led to a significant transformation in the nature of work. For one thing, employees forwardly navigate various communication software during non-working hours to fulfill the expectations of organizations. For another, the omnipresence of internet streamlines communication between leaders and employees, making it easier for superiors to issue demands. Thus, work hours extend beyond the formal boundaries, and the lines between professional and personal life become increasingly blurred. After-hours Electronic Communication Expectations (AECE) embody one of the strategies utilized by leaders to integrate into the personal lives of employees, fostering an anticipation that “being available and responsive to organizational work demands through electronic communication devices during non-working hours is expected”. AECE dictates that employees stay “available” and “responsive”, highlighting the organizational norm that requires employees to be easily reachable and promptly address work-related information outside official office hours.

Nevertheless, in recent years, the introduction of the “Right to Digital Disconnection” in certain developed countries has given rise to concepts such as “Digital Detoxification” and “Unplugging Days”. These initiatives rationalize individuals liberating themselves from the “electronic prostheses” during personal time, further reinforcing the rights of workers. Simultaneously, the media advocates

for the public to avoid excessive immersion in electronic devices, championing authentic, face-to-face communication with family and friends. In other words, in essence, the current AECE manifests a divergence trend in both the obligation and emotional aspects with employees. But, the expectation from leaders to address urgent work during non-working hours proves to be a formidable challenge for any organization to eradicate directly. Hence, a comprehensive analysis of the impact and mechanisms of AECE, specifically, figuring out the costs and benefits of AECE is vital to organizations.

Through examination of the existing literature, current research on AECE primarily unfolds along three main directions. (1) Resource conservation theory. These studies indicate that AECE leads to the escalation of employee work pressure, fatigue and exhaustion, and imbalance in psychological detachment. These factors influence performance and contribute to fostering tendencies towards resignation (Belkin et al., 2020). (2) Subject initiative theory. AECE functions as a conduit to enhance communication effectiveness, social support among colleagues, and overall work performance (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021). (3) Boundary theory. Research focuses on how AECE, in non-work settings, compels employees to assume multiple roles, thereby exacerbating conflicts between work and family (Cho et al., 2020). These studies significantly contributed to the advancement of AECE. However, it has tended to overlook the emotional responses of subordinates to AECE. The emotional and work states of employees are intimately connected, such as “lying flat”. Consequently, identify employees’ emotion regulation strategies becomes pivotal for resolving practical issues, and prioritizing employee emotion management emerges as imperative for organizational success. In accordance with the Affective Event Theory (AET), job characteristics, work environment, and work-related events collectively shape employees’ judgments and emotional states, subsequently influencing corresponding work outcomes, attitudes, and behaviors. Taking these considerations into account, this study will adopt AET to investigate whether AECE will impact employees’ emotion strategies and subsequent behaviors.

Furthermore, this paper selects emotional labor as the ensuing emotional response, with the objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the motivations behind their subsequent work behaviors. When there is a discrepancy between the state that an employee is facing and their own expected goals, it triggers an individual’s assessment of their current emotional state. If this discrepancy is perceived as significant, then evaluations and behavioral responses that differ from the current one may follow, such as performing emotional labor. Emotional labor involves employees actively overseeing their individual emotions, adapting their outwardly visible emotional states to conform to the organization’s prescribed standards for emotional expression (Hochschild, 1983). Compared to physical and cognitive labor, emotional fluctuations, categorized as the “third type of labor”, are often more discreet and influenced by various factors such as individual traits. This aspect is more likely to be overlooked by organizations. Specifically, the most common two-dimensional emotional labor includes surface acting and deep acting as coping strategies. Hochschild (1983) considers this forced suppression of inner feelings as a process filled with negative emotions such as tension and anxiety, defining it as emotional dissonance. When employees engage in surface acting, it consumes individual psychological resources and may lead to professional burnout, leaving no room to address knowledge requests, namely leading to knowledge hiding behavior. On the contrary, employees attempting to overcome imbalanced states through deep means such as self-persuasion and imagination, adjusting internal emotions, and genuinely displaying expressions and actions in line with professional role requirements, represent deep acting. Two major potential strategies in emotional regulation for deep acting are cognitive reappraisal (including perspective-taking and positive reappraisal) and attention deployment, both of which play crucial roles depending on different situations. When employees adjust their emotional states to comply with organizational guidelines, they are more likely to receive positive feedback from the organization, resulting in a positive emotional experience. Consequently, employees are more inclined to engage in organizational citizenship behavior, such as knowledge sharing behavior. Based on this, this study

posits that employees' emotional labor will have an impact on their knowledge sharing and knowledge hiding behaviors.

In addition, AET points out that differences in individual personality factors are one of the factors leading to varying emotional responses and work attitudes. For this purpose, we introduce perspective-taking as a moderating variable. Perspective-taking, as one of the pathways of individual cognitive empathy, is defined as the cognitive skill of considering and understanding others' psychological perspectives. It is influenced by situational factors and individual empathy, and is affected by individual characteristics such as patience, sensitivity, and rationality. Individuals with high perspective-taking can accurately perceive and understand the thoughts of leaders, thereby actively regulating their own emotions. Therefore, this study introduces perspective-taking to investigate its moderating role in the relationship between AECE and deep acting as well as surface acting. In summary, based on the AET, This study aims to identify the boundary conditions under which AECE operates and the mechanism and boundary conditions of AECE's impact on knowledge management behaviors.

2. HYPOTHESES

2.1. The Interplay Impact between AECE and Perspective-taking on Emotional Labor

The escalating convenience and immediacy in the process of digital communication, while enhancing employees' work flexibility and autonomy, may concurrently lead to the diffusion of managerial control by leaders into non-professional domains. AECE, as a reflection of organizational behavioral norms, constitutes a part of employees' individual role sets, formed in accordance with corporate culture and job requirements. Compared with Western countries, it seems more meaningful to study the workplace environment in China with the culture of high power distance. On one hand, as a representative work demand, AECE, under the pressures of organizational and societal needs, necessitates employees to sacrifice their personal non-working hours to address work-related information through communication devices, such as "urgent tasks requested by leadership for immediate follow-up". However, in China, a comprehensive institutional guarantee for workers' right to rest has long been established. The Constitution explicitly stipulates the right to rest as a fundamental human right enjoyed by Chinese citizens. Employees have the right to autonomously decide, under legal constraints, whether to enjoy free time and how to do so. On the other hand, the restoration of employees' own energy during leisure time is crucial. AECE leads to sustain physical, mental, or emotional depletion during non-working hours, potentially compromising their overall well-being. Unclear work boundaries and substantial accessibility requirements can subject employees to remote pressure (Telepressure), contributing to work overload. Numerous studies have confirmed that such remote pressure can have adverse effects on employee health, fatigue, emotional exhaustion, happiness, and sleep outcomes, and these negative impacts tend to be persistent. From the employee's perspective, based on the aforementioned, AECE can be considered a negative work event.

Furthermore, on account of the AET process of "work environment characteristics-work events-cognitive appraisal-emotional response", AECE, as a high-frequency manifestation of work environment characteristics, influences subordinates' discernment and analysis of superiors and the organization, thereby triggering emotional fluctuations and responses among employees. Particularly, when employees perceive that AECE significantly alters their state, proximal responses (cognitive appraisal and emotional reactions) will manifest accordingly. However, at this point, the updated proximal responses to negative work events may not necessarily fully align with the organization's requirements. In order to standardize the exhibited emotional and behavioral states, employees often engage in "covert" adjustments, specifically, emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Thus, according to the AET, AECE has the potential to trigger emotional labor among employees.

At the same time, AET and relevant literature indicate that individual trait orientation is a factor influencing emotional responses. The emotional state in the workplace is regulated by employees' tendency to experience positive or negative aspects of life, namely emotional trait regulation. Individuals with high negative emotional traits tend to be more sensitive to negative emotional stimuli (work events), potentially leading to more negative emotional reactions, while individuals with high positive emotional traits exhibit the opposite pattern. Furthermore, according to AET, mere impact assessments of encountered work events are unlikely to influence emotional fluctuations. It is only when a more in-depth analysis is conducted that emotional changes are likely to occur. Specifically:

Employees with a high perspective-taking tendency often possess the ability for transpositional consideration, enabling them to empathize more with their leaders. They are willing to understand and accept superiors' viewpoints and task arrangements, increasing the selection of appropriate coping strategies and effectively displaying more moderate emotional responses. This implies that individuals with a high perspective-taking tendency are more inclined to consider issues from the perspective of their leaders. They are more willing to consider the urgency of tasks, and the superior's requirements, thus rationalizing AECE. Moreover, even when feeling pressured to respond quickly to work-related messages during non-working hours, employees with a high perspective-taking level have the capability to handle AECE by choosing suitable coping strategies. For those, the gap between their true feelings and the organization's expectations for their displayed emotions is small. There is no need for superficial concealment and pretense; employees engage in deep acting behavior.

On the contrary, when employees with a low level of personal perspective-taking receive AECE, the probability of resenting AECE significantly increases. They are unwilling to attempt to understand their leader's requirements. This leads to negative evaluations of leaders, intensifying employees' negative emotions. The more negative emotions they experience, the more their emotional resources diminish, making it difficult to evoke and display the positive emotions that the organization expects. However, the emotional-value paradigm under the metaphor of a family-style organization has formed China's unique organizational genes. Compared to rigid written contracts under the technological-value paradigm, enterprises often leave room beyond formal organizational rules, and members emphasize ethics and emotional networks in expressing opinions. Owing to leadership authority and personal relationships, employees often choose to tolerate, and being forced to engage in involuntary behaviors. In such situations, employees can only conceal negative emotions, and through pretense, align their outward behavior with what the organization expects, engaging in surface acting. Thus, this study hypothesizes:

H1: For individuals with a high propensity for perspective-taking, AECE will lead to deep acting.

H2: For individuals with a low propensity for perspective-taking, AECE will lead to surface acting.

2.2. Emotional Labor and Knowledge Management Behavior

AET posits that employees' work behavior is triggered by emotions. Therefore, this study intends to focus on the analysis of the subsequent results of AECE through the lens of the "emotional response-work behavior" process. Knowledge sharing behavior refers to the proactive and voluntary sharing and dissemination of personally possessed knowledge information by knowledge holders with other members within the organization. According to previous research, the willingness of employees to contribute knowledge resources to the collective is influenced by factors such as the level of trust, individual-oriented motivation, leadership behavior, organizational identification, and organizational atmosphere. Specifically, deep acting helps individuals think about problems from a positive perspective. It involves employees integrating their role with their professional role, expressing sincere emotions from within to the outside, achieving internal and external harmony. Consequently, the perceived reactions of subordinates to leaders expressing AECE are more positive, potentially fostering a positive emotional exchange and interaction between superiors and subordinates, enhancing employee recognition of leadership. Subsequently, job satisfaction and interpersonal

relationships within the organization improve, making employees more willing to contribute to the organization and engage in knowledge sharing behavior beyond their formal roles.

Conversely, knowledge hiding behavior refers to intentional concealment and deceptive actions by employees when facing colleagues' knowledge requests related to information, viewpoints, and experiences. On the one hand, during the surface acting process, employees, hindered by personal relationships and authority, have to "perform" behaviors that conform to organizational norms. This state of inconsistency between internal and external aspects consumes more psychological resources, leading to cognitive and emotional imbalances. This may even negatively affect their attention resources, intensifying their hostile attributions towards the organization. On the other hand, being compelled to "comply" with leadership expectations through false displays may be detected. It means that employees engaged in surface acting are burdened with emotional strain and face increasingly challenging interpersonal relationships with colleagues and leaders within the organization. Surface acting can damage individual interpersonal relationships within the organization, leading to increased knowledge hiding behavior. Thus, this study hypothesizes:

H3: Deep acting has a significant positive impact on employees' knowledge sharing behavior.

H4: Surface acting has a significant positive impact on employees' knowledge hiding behavior.

2.3. Moderated Mediation

Building on the previous discussion on the moderating effect of employee viewpoint adoption and the impact of emotional labor on employee knowledge management behavior, this study further proposes moderated mediation models. It suggests that employee viewpoint adoption can further moderate the mediating effect of emotional labor between AECE and employee knowledge management behavior. Specifically, combining H1 and H3, when employees have a high propensity for viewpoint adoption, they can positively respond to leadership AECE by aligning with organizational norms, adjusting emotional responses, engaging in deep acting, and subsequently gaining rich psychological resources and harmonious relationships with superiors. This enhances job satisfaction, making employees more willing to engage in knowledge sharing behavior. Combining H2 and H4, when employees lack the ability of viewpoint adoption, AECE as a negative work event will bring stress to employees. Hindered by authority, employees must conceal their true negative emotions, engage in surface acting, lose emotional resources, decrease organizational commitment, and possibly form hostile attitudes towards the organization. This leads to covert knowledge hiding behavior. Thus, this study hypothesizes:

H5: Perspective-taking moderates the mediating role of deep acting in the relationship between AECE and knowledge sharing behavior. The higher the level of employee understanding of superiors' expectations, the stronger the indirect relationship between AECE and knowledge sharing behavior through deep acting, and vice versa.

H6: Perspective taking moderates the mediating role of surface acting in the relationship between AECE and knowledge hiding behavior. The lower the level of employee willingness to understand superiors' expectations, the stronger indirect relationship between AECE and knowledge hiding behavior through surface acting, and vice versa.

In summary, the theoretical model of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

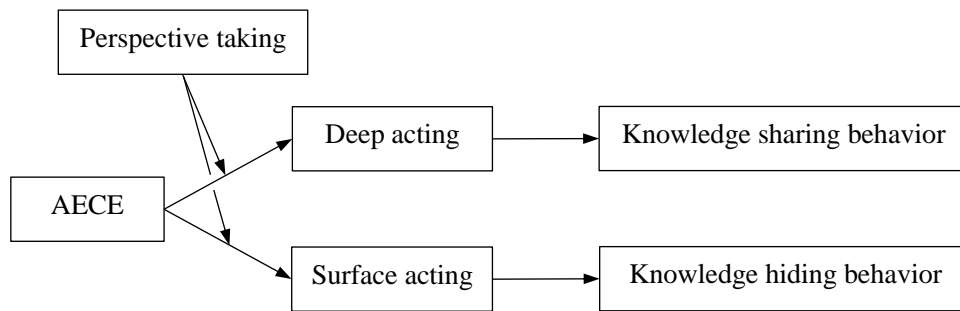


Figure 1. Theoretical model

3. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Theoretical Contribution

Firstly, this study, adopting an emotional perspective, explores whether and how leaders’ After-Hours Electronic Communication Expectations influences employees’ emotions and subsequently their knowledge management behaviors, thus enhancing the existing AECE-related theories. Previous research on AECE has predominantly focused on resources (Belkin et al., 2020), and employee autonomy (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021). However, the impact of emotions, a crucial source guiding individual behavior, on employees’ subsequent reactions to AECE has often been overlooked in research. Consequently, this study, by delving into individual emotions and selecting emotional labor as the mediating variable, investigates how AECE influences employees’ knowledge management behaviors through emotional labor. This approach enriches the current understanding of AECE as a job demand, expanding the theoretical perspectives within AECE research.

Furthermore, this study reveals the “double-edged sword” effect of AECE on employee behavior, aiding researchers in comprehensively understanding the impact of AECE. Existing research has predominantly focused on the negative effects of AECE, such as exacerbating negative emotions in employees, increasing turnover intentions, and contributing to work-family conflicts (Belkin et al., 2020). There is limited research addressing the positive aspects of AECE, such as enhancing social support among colleagues and subsequently improving job performance (Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021). This study identifies two contradictory mediating pathways, namely deep acting and surface acting, through which AECE positively and negatively influences employees’ knowledge management behaviors. This enriches the research on the effects of AECE.

In conclusion, within the framework of the Affective Events Theory, this study validates the moderating role of perspective-taking and extends the boundary conditions under which AECE behavior operates. It elucidates that the activation of emotional labor in response to AECE depends on employees’ individual capacity for perspective-taking. The findings indicate that individuals with a high level of perspective-taking ability are likely to engage in deep acting behavior in response to AECE, consequently increasing their knowledge sharing behaviors. Conversely, when employees exhibit a low level of perspective-taking, AECE tends to result in surface acting, exacerbating employees’ tendencies toward knowledge hiding. In this way, the study, from the perspective of individual differences, clarifies the external conditions influencing the impact of AECE on employee behavior, providing further evidence for the contextualization of AECE. Additionally, the research effectively identifies the boundary conditions under which AECE operates, specifically highlighting perspective-taking as one of the situational factors within the Affective Events Theory, thereby enriching the theoretical framework of the theory.

3.2. Practical Inspiration

On one hand, this study serves as a cautionary reminder for leaders regarding the potential negative impacts of their AECE. The findings indicate that AECE may serve as a catalyst for rupturing relationships between employees and the organization. Therefore, organizations should emphasize the negative consequences of AECE and take measures such as training and team evaluations to enhance managers' task handling, communication coordination, and empathy skills. This approach aims to guide leaders in expressing work expectations reasonably, considering potential negative emotions in employees, and minimizing harm to the organization.

On the other hand, the study provides insights into mitigating the adverse effects of AECE. Recognizing the diverse responses of individuals with different levels of perspective-taking, organizational management should adopt a personalized approach. For instance, leaders engaging in AECE should proactively consider the individual differences of their subordinates. Encouragement and motivation can be directed toward employees with high perspective-taking abilities, facilitating effective communication and task optimization. However, employees with low perspective-taking abilities may be less receptive to understanding AECE. Leaders need to enhance communication, build trust, and clarify the importance of tasks during interactions to prevent negative impacts on the team and organization from this group of employees.

3.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

Firstly, despite employing experimental methods and multi-time point surveys in Studies 1 and 2 to better comprehend causality and mitigate common method bias, the online distribution of surveys posed challenges in precisely aligning employees with their respective leaders. Consequently, the study did not adopt a multi-source approach. Future research might consider introducing the study in specific industries and contexts, employing multi-source for data collection. For instance, employees could assess AECE and perspective-taking levels at time point 1, while at time point 2, leaders or colleagues could evaluate emotional labor and knowledge management behaviors, yielding more credible conclusions.

Secondly, this study initiated from an emotional perspective, preliminarily explored the “double-edged sword” effect of AECE on employees. Future research could endeavor to investigate the impact of AECE from additional perspectives. A more comprehensive analysis of its mechanisms and boundary conditions is warranted. For example, examining the influence of employee perceptions of organizational factors, such as organizational cynicism traits, could be valuable. High organizational cynicism tends to induce negative psychological tendencies among employees, making them more resistant to stressors like AECE and questioning leaders' motivations, thereby intensifying negative emotional experiences.

Thirdly, current research on AECE predominantly concentrates on its impact on subordinate behavior (Belkin et al., 2020; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2021) while overlooking the study of the antecedents of AECE and its effects on leaders themselves. Leaders may adjust their work patterns based on daily work situations, information dissemination, and teamwork, influencing their AECE behavior. Do different leadership styles lead to different expectation patterns? Furthermore, after expressing expectations for electronic communication during non-working hours, what impact does it have on leaders themselves? Future research could delve into AECE from the perspective of its antecedents or the actor-centered approach, providing a more in-depth analysis.

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