

Horizontal relationships in an organization as a factor promoting employee innovation: A proposal for empirical assumptions

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

*Horizontal relations,
Resource Based View,
Employee innovation,
Psychological safety,
Social exchange
theory,
Opportunity
exploitation,
Predictors of
innovation,
Interpersonal
communication*

The aim of this article is to present a conceptual model explaining the impact of horizontal relationships in an organization on innovative employee behavior. In particular, the study focuses on interpersonal trust, peer support, and knowledge sharing as key dimensions of non-hierarchical workplace relationships that may foster the generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas by employees. The proposed framework integrates the Resource-Based View (RBV), social exchange theory, and the concept of psychological safety in order to explain how social resources embedded in everyday coworker interactions can stimulate bottom-up innovation. The model also includes important mediating mechanisms, such as team identification, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation, as well as potential moderators related to leadership style, organizational culture, and the degree of formalization within the organization. By emphasizing horizontal relations as valuable and difficult-to-imitate social resources, the article contributes to a better understanding of how innovation can emerge not only from formal structures and leadership, but also from peer-level interactions and collaborative climates. The paper constitutes a preliminary stage of a broader research project conducted as part of a planned doctoral dissertation and outlines directions for future empirical verification using quantitative methods.

1. Introduction

Dynamic technological changes, the growing complexity of the business environment, and pressure to continuously improve processes mean that modern organizations are looking for new sources of innovation. While the importance of innovation resulting from formal research and development processes is well described in the literature, there is growing interest in the phenomenon of employee innovative behavior, understood as the bottom-up generation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas by employees at all levels of the organization (Anderson, Potočník & Zhou, 2014). Contemporary organizations seek sources of innovation not only in formal structures or strategies, but also in soft, internal organizational factors. Literature often emphasizes the role of leaders in stimulating innovation, but relatively little attention is paid to horizontal relationships, i.e., everyday cooperation and interactions between employees. Contemporary organizations increasingly expect their employees not only to be highly efficient, but also to have a pro-innovative attitude and actively participate in process improvement. In this context, environmental and social factors that foster bottom-up innovation become crucial (Anderson, Potočník & Zhou, 2014; Newman et al., 2021). This research project focuses on the role of horizontal relationships, i.e., relationships between employees that are not related to hierarchy, as factors supporting innovative behavior of individuals in the workplace. Phenomena such as interpersonal trust, informal support, camaraderie, and knowledge sharing within teams are potentially important resources that support employee-driven innovation (Montani, Dufour & Andiappan, 2025; Wicaksono & Pusparini, 2025; Dhir & Vallabh, 2025; Foss et al., 2015).

Previous research has primarily emphasized the roles of individual factors, such as personality, motivation, and competence, as well as organizational factors related to leadership and the climate of innovation (Newman et al., 2021). Much less attention has been paid to horizontal relationships, i.e., interactions between colleagues at the same level of the organizational structure. However, it has been noted that these relationships provide an

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important context conducive to creativity and innovative behavior, especially in organizations based on cooperation, mutual trust, and knowledge sharing (Wang et al., 2022).

The aim of this article is to present a synthetic conceptual model explaining how horizontal relationships can serve as resources conducive to employee innovation, in light of resource-based theory (RBT) and opportunity-enabling conditions theory. The presented model forms the basis for the planned empirical study.

2. Justification for addressing the problem and research gap

The literature indicates that the climate of innovation and leadership style are crucial for the creative activity of employees (Newman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a growing number of studies show that an important but often underestimated area is social relations between employees, including mutual support, trust, and knowledge sharing (Wang et al. 2022). It is pointed out that these relationships form the basis for the emergence of psychological safety, which enables employees to take risks associated with proposing new ideas (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon & Ziv, 2010).

At the same time, the literature notes a lack of consistent models integrating horizontal relationships with psychological mechanisms leading to innovation (Dhir & Vallabh, 2025). There is also a need to embed analyses of relationships in the organization in the perspective of resource-based theory (RBV), according to which valuable, rare, and difficult-to-imitate resources, such as social relationships, can form the basis of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Despite the growing number of studies on employee innovative behavior, most of the existing work focuses on the influence of individual factors (e.g., personality traits, motivation) or leadership style. Much less attention has been paid to horizontal interpersonal relationships within a team, which constitute an important psychological and social context for creative and innovative behavior (Wang et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a need in the literature for a better understanding of mediating mechanisms, such as psychological safety, which can act as a "psychological buffer" that encourages experimentation and initiative (Carmeli et al., 2010; Newman et al., 2021). However, there is still a lack of coherent empirical models integrating peer support, trust, and knowledge sharing as complex systems of horizontal relationships. Table 1 provides an overview of selected literature on the subject.

TABLE 1. Selected items from the literature review

Article	Significance
Newman, A., Round, H., Wang, S., & Mount, M. (2021). Innovation climate: A systematic review of the literature and agenda for future research. <i>Journal of Occupational Organizational Psychology</i> , 93, 73-109.	A review indicating that team climate and interpersonal relationships are underestimated predictors of innovation
Wang H, Chen X, Wang H, and Xie M (2022) Employee innovative behavior and workplace wellbeing: Leader support for innovation and coworker ostracism as mediators. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> . 13, 1014195	Strong relationship between coworker support and employee innovation
Anderson, N., Potočnik, K., & Zhou, J. (2014). Innovation and creativity in organizations: A state-of-the-science review. <i>Journal of Management</i> , 40(5), 1297-1333.	A comprehensive review of research on employee innovation points to the underestimated role of social relationships within a team
Dhir, S. & Vallabh, P. (2025). Do social relationships at work enhance creativity and innovative behavior? Role of psychological safety. <i>Acta Psychologica</i> , 253, 104751	Shows that psychological safety is a mediator between relationships and innovation
Duncan, R.C. (2025). The Role of Psychological Safety in High-Performing Teams: A Principal's Perspective. <i>Texila International Journal of Academic Research</i> , 12(4), 64-78; Jin, H., & Peng, Y., 2024, The impact of team psychological safety on employee innovative performance: A study with communication behavior as a mediator variable. <i>PLoS ONE</i> , 19(10), e0306629.	Mediation analysis of team safety

Baer, M. (2012). Putting creativity to work: The implementation of creative ideas in organizations. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 55(5), 1102-1119.	The classic concept of innovation implementation as a process requiring environmental support
Hughes, M., & Morgan, R. E. (2007). Deconstructing the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and business performance at the embryonic stage of firm growth. <i>Industrial Marketing Management</i> , 36(5), 651-661.	It points to the importance of informal relationships and horizontal communication in the innovation process, especially in small and medium-sized companies
Montani, F., Dufour, L., & Andiappan, M. (2025). How and when does trust in coworkers make newcomers more innovative? The dual roles of psychological safety and interpersonal conflict. <i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i> , 110(12), 1689-1701.	Emphasizes the role of peer support and its impact on innovation; empirical study

Source: Authors' compilation

The presented literature gap creates space for research focusing on the analysis of horizontal relationships as potential predictors of employee innovation, considering their role as social resources and conditions conducive to the exploitation of innovation opportunities.

3. Theoretical foundations

Resource-Based View (RBV): According to resource theory, organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage through resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and difficult to replace (Barney, 1991). In recent years, it has been increasingly recognized that these resources can be intangible and social in nature, including interpersonal relationships, trust, communication, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Horizontal relationships can therefore be a key organizational resource that promotes innovation by reducing uncertainty, facilitating the flow of information, and building an environment conducive to experimentation. The RBV approach emphasizes the resources, capabilities, and competencies of an organization to identify ways to ensure competitive advantage. A company may have various resources and capabilities, and most of these capabilities are closely related to improving performance (Kero et al., 2023). Horizontal relationships between employees can be treated in RBV terms as a strategic, intangible resource that strengthens an organization's ability to generate and implement innovation, as it is difficult to imitate and based on the unique social capital of employees (Barney, 1991; Kero et al., 2023).

Social Exchange Theory: Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the gold standards for understanding workplace behavior. Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the most influential theories in the social sciences, with applications in various fields (Ahmad et al., 2022). Given the key role of innovation in maintaining the competitiveness of companies, understanding how the psychological safety of a team promotes employee innovation through communication behaviors is of significant theoretical and practical importance. (Jin et al., 2024). Social exchange theory assumes that relationships between individuals are based on reciprocity, trust, and a sense of obligation (Blau, 1964). In the context of organizations, this means that employees who receive support from their colleagues are more likely to reciprocate through increased engagement, including innovative activity (Montani, Dufour & Andiappan, 2025). According to SET, positive horizontal relationships can form the basis for building mutual commitment, trust, and a sense of support, which encourage pro-innovative actions as a form of reciprocity for the interpersonal support received (Blau, 1964; Montani, Dufour & Andiappan, 2025).

Psychological Safety: Conceptual and empirical research on psychological safety - a state of reduced interpersonal risk - is therefore timely, relevant, and extensive (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). Psychological safety, understood as the belief that an individual can express their ideas without fear of negative consequences, is one of the most important predictors of employee innovation (Edmondson, 1999). Numerous studies confirm that positive relationships within a team - especially trust and support - enhance feelings of safety and encourage the presentation of new ideas (Dhir & Vallabh, 2025). Psychological safety and a climate of psychosocial safety in the workplace are essential for employee health and safety. These concepts are key to ensuring job satisfaction, work engagement, and productivity (Dong et al., 2024). Psychological safety, which is the result of supportive horizontal relationships, increases employees' willingness to present new ideas and take risks, making it one of the key factors conducive to innovation in teams (Edmondson, 1999; Dhir & Vallabh, 2025).

Innovative employee behavior: Innovation is essential for organizations as they must adapt to rapid changes in their environment. Organizations may face external challenges related to the innovative products they create.

When creating innovations, employees involved in the process should contribute new ideas to achieve organizational goals. Therefore, innovative employee behavior should be developed. Innovative behaviors at work include the development, acceptance, and implementation of new ideas for products, technologies, and work methods by employees; they are considered an essential factor determining the success of an organization (Srirahayu et al., 2023). Baer's model (2012) indicates that the implementation of ideas is a process that requires not only creativity but also environmental support. For this reason, the work context, interpersonal relationships, and knowledge exchange play a key role in the innovation process. Strong relationships between employees facilitate the flow of knowledge and create a supportive environment that fosters all stages of innovative behavior - from idea generation to implementation - in line with employee innovation models (Baer, 2012; Srirahayu et al., 2023). Employee innovation is one of the best ways to support innovation and organizational success (Asfar et al., 2014).

4. Proposed conceptual framework model

Peer relationships are a social resource (in the spirit of the Resource-Based View) and an Opportunity-Enabling Condition that facilitates the generation, implementation, and sharing of innovative ideas. The conceptual model is based on the assumption that horizontal relationships are a social resource that supports employee innovation. It predicts the following relationships:

Variables in the proposed model:

- Independent variables (predictors) Horizontal relationships (e.g., trust, peer support, knowledge sharing):
 - Horizontal trust (interpersonal trust)
 - Informal peer support
 - Knowledge sharing
- Mediating variables (mediators M):
 - Team identification
 - Psychological safety
 - Intrinsic motivation (or sense of influence)
- Dependent variable Y:
 - Employee innovative behavior
- Moderating variable (optional):
 - Management style or organizational structure (e.g., degree of formalization)
 - Organizational culture (e.g., cooperation vs. competition)

These assumptions will enable the main research objective to be achieved. The empirical aim is to identify and explain the relationship between horizontal relations in the organization and innovative employee behavior. The main objective has been broken down into the following specific objectives:

1. Analysis of the impact of trust, support, and knowledge sharing on innovation.
2. Determining the mediating role of psychological safety and team identification.
3. Identification of factors moderating the strength of these relationships.

Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the conceptual research model of the planned project.

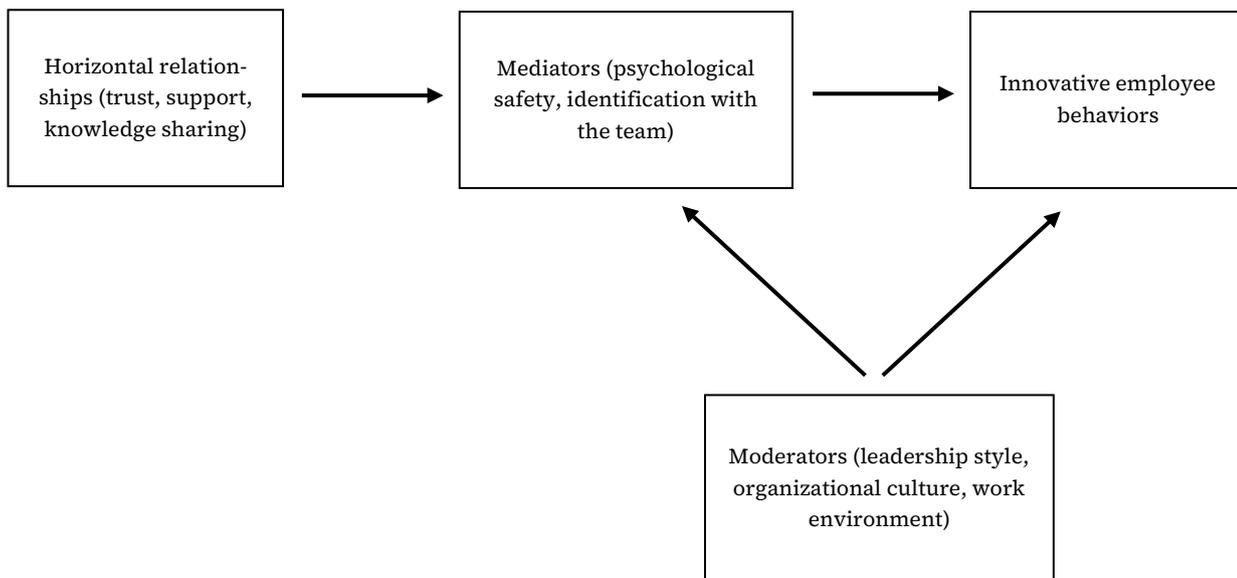


FIGURE 2. Conceptual framework model

Source: Authors' compilation.

Sample hypotheses:

H1: Interpersonal trust has a positive impact on innovative employee behavior.

H2: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between peer support and employee innovation.

H3: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between trust and innovative behaviors.

H4: The relationship between horizontal relationships and innovation is stronger in organizations with a low level of formalization.

The research project will be correlational and causal in nature, using quantitative research. This will allow for testing the proposed theoretical model that takes into account horizontal relationships and their impact on employee innovation. The planned study will be correlational and causal in nature. It will be conducted using quantitative methods, mainly in the form of a survey addressed to employees and, if possible, their supervisors, which will reduce the risk of measurement error resulting from a single data source. The questionnaires will be based on verified measurement scales for trust, peer support, knowledge sharing, psychological safety, and employee innovation, and their content will be assessed for content validity (CVI) by experts and undergo a back-translation procedure. After data collection, an analysis of the reliability and validity of the tools will be carried out, including indicators such as Cronbach's α , AVE, and factor analysis - exploratory (Exploratory Factor Analysis, EFA), if the tools are adapted, and confirmatory (Confirmatory Factor Analysis, CFA) to confirm the structure of the measurement model. The relationships between constructs will be tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS or SmartPLS, allowing for the analysis of both direct and indirect (mediation) and conditional (moderation) effects. The study will cover a sample of approximately 300-400 employees working in project teams, which will provide adequate statistical power and allow for reliable testing of a complex theoretical model concerning the impact of horizontal relationships on employee innovation.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The proposed theoretical model integrates organizational, psychological, and social perspectives, assuming that horizontal relationships in the workplace serve as a key organizational resource that enables the development and implementation of employee innovation. According to resource theory, it is precisely those social resources that are difficult to imitate - such as trust, mutual support, and the free flow of knowledge - that can become the basis for building competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The article develops this idea, pointing out that these relationships not only facilitate the sharing of ideas but also strengthen the employee's sense of autonomy and psychological security, which is a key condition for innovative behavior (Edmondson, 1999). From a practical point of view, if the presented model is empirically confirmed, it will provide strong arguments for designing a work environment that promotes cooperation rather than competition. Companies that want to maintain or increase their level of innovation should pay particular attention to people management policies and practices

that strengthen positive interactions within teams. This means, among other things, investing in interpersonal communication training, mentoring programs, integration activities, and building a culture of knowledge sharing.

It is also worth emphasizing the role of leaders who, through their communication style, task distribution, and approach to mistakes, can strengthen or weaken the climate of psychological safety. A leadership style that supports autonomy and collaboration can act as a catalyst for innovation, while an autocratic or control-based style can block the sharing of ideas, even if horizontal relationships are strong.

The model also has important implications for organizations using agile, project-based, and matrix structures, where traditional hierarchies are reduced, and the role of relationships between employees increases significantly. In such environments, horizontal relationships can have an even greater impact on knowledge exchange, idea generation, and adaptation to change. From a theoretical point of view, the proposed approach adds value by combining the RBV perspective with the concept of psychological safety. It also points to the need for more complex models explaining employee innovation that take into account the simultaneous impact of multiple dimensions of social relationships. This may pave the way for multi-level research analyzing both relationships between individuals and the structure of social networks within an organization.

The article also points to some limitations that should be considered in further work. First, most studies on horizontal relationships are based on self-reported data, which increases the risk of common method bias. Second, relationships within a team can be dynamic and change over time, suggesting a need for longitudinal research. Third, national and organizational culture may moderate the strength and direction of the analyzed relationships, which is worth considering when designing empirical research. All these observations indicate that the presented model can serve as a starting point for a broad research program on the role of horizontal relationships in developing employee innovation. Horizontal relationships, including interpersonal trust, peer support, and knowledge sharing, play an important, though often underestimated, role in innovation processes in organizations. From the perspective of organizational resource theory, they can be treated as unique social capital that increases the potential of employees to share ideas and engage in pro-innovation initiatives. From a psychological perspective, they form the foundation of psychological safety, which enables free experimentation and reduces fear of failure. The proposed conceptual model presents horizontal relationships as a central element enabling the development of innovative employee behavior and points to important mediating and moderating mechanisms that can shape this relationship. This model integrates various theoretical trends and proposes a more complex, multidimensional view of innovation in organizations.

The article provides a starting point for further empirical research that can verify the proposed hypotheses and provide practical guidance for organizations. In the face of dynamic market changes and growing pressure to generate innovation, understanding the role of horizontal relationships becomes not only an interesting scientific issue but also an important area for management practice. Organizations that consciously develop a culture of cooperation and mutual trust can better leverage the innovative potential of their employees. In summary, it can be said that the study of horizontal relationships not only broadens theoretical knowledge but also makes a significant contribution to management practice by supporting the creation of work environments conducive to bottom-up innovation. Horizontal relationships are a key but often overlooked factor influencing employee innovation. The proposed theoretical model provides a basis for further empirical research and may contribute to a better understanding of how organizations can build an environment conducive to bottom-up innovation.

Declarations

Ethical declaration

The research does not require ethical committee approval, as it does not involve human participants, personal data or experimental procedures. The author declares that scientific and ethical principles were adhered to during the conduct and writing of this study, and that all sources have been appropriately cited.

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AI disclosure

The author commits to adhering to ethical principles, transparency, and responsibility in the use of artificial intelligence tools, ensuring their academic responsibility.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note: This information has been provided by the author.

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