Summary

Whereas extensive research attention has been given to the understanding of information sharing behavior by social psychologists, communication and technology specialists, and computer science scientists, only relatively recently, strategic information sharing behavior has increasingly received researchers’ attention. Strategic information sharing (SIS) usually happens when individuals share relatively unimportant information, keeping the important private information for themselves. The study of SIS is an emergent and interesting line of research, with great potential to explain and clarify the underlying mechanisms of sharing or not sharing (enough) valuable information.

Current research positioned SIS in the heart of information asymmetries (i.e., some of us know more about some things than others) given that it is the information asymmetries that create conflicting opportunities alluring people to often exploit them. This often results in an unbalance of power, distrusts, loss of social, economic resources etc. For instance, an employee asks another colleague to share some private information (e.g., a successful grant proposal) which might be helpful in solving a task at hand (e.g., writing a new grant proposal). Instead of providing that valuable information, the colleague shares some unimportant information just to make a cooperative impression but keeping the important private information to himself. The study of SIS is scientifically as well as socially relevant.

This research aims to 1) increase understanding of what SIS is and 2) to identify and provide (technological) solutions to stimulate the sharing of information (i.e., to decrease the negative effects of SIS by stimulating individuals to share especially their private important information). In other words, this research investigates the impact of human motivations and cognitions and of specific (theory-inspired) technological features on SIS.

We thus provide an integrative motivational-technological framework meant to enhance private important information sharing. In order to address the overall research aim, we focused on a mixed-method approach (i.e., five experimental studies and one field survey). To check for robustness of the findings, different cover stories (e.g., solving the mystery of a stolen painting,
applying for a study-abroad scholarship, making decisions within an event-planning company (i.e., sports- or music-related decisions), taking part in a meeting at work where other colleagues ask you to share information) had been used across the six studies.

To ensure that the findings can be generalized to other categories of people as well, we also focused on a dual sample, student- and non-student (i.e., academic) participants. Important, this research is focused on the sharer and not on the receiver of information. Moreover, (no) identifying information has been given to the sharer about the other team members, information sharing being based either on sharer’s judgments of information only, being person-related or both.

We define SIS as the individual behavior of deliberately sharing especially a particular type of information, as a motivated response to an expectation (or request) of sharing information. Task interdependence and sharer’s expertise are important underlying assumptions of SIS; the deliberate act of sharing a particular type of information comes from a knowledgeable team member with certain expertise and information sharing serves the accomplishment of a particular task to which other team members are also expected/required to contribute.

SIS also assumes that there is awareness about the (potential) value of one’s own (un)shared information as well as awareness about the (potential) receiver(s) of information, otherwise, SIS would not take shape; the act of sharing may have a positive or even a negative impact for the task (e.g., a poor-quality decision making) or toward receivers of information who may be more or less motivated to contribute their information in return.

Examining how different motives affect SIS, lab studies mainly showed that individuals with a prosocial motivation shared more important and more private information than individuals with a proself motivation. Next to these findings, actual and not perceived time pressure affected sharing of private information. Subsequently, this research took a step further and investigated the effects of social power construals (as opportunity vs. as responsibility) on SIS.

The main results indicated that construing power as responsibility (vs. as opportunity) essentially increased sharing of private information. The
moderating role of perceived ability on the relationship between social power construals and SIS was also investigated to make sure that the effects between social power construals and SIS are mainly due to social power construals; power and ability are two factors that have been studied confounded in previous research being also entangled in real work settings.

The main results indicated that construing power as responsibility (vs. as opportunity) increased the sharing of private information, only under conditions of high perceived ability. Examining how different technological features affect SIS, studies mainly showed that push information displays increased the sharing of private information especially for individuals with a prosocial motivation. Similarly, the sheer presence of the ‘Trust’ button increased especially the sharing of private information.

By means of two field studies conducted among academics, it was finally tested what is robustly generalizable from the lab studies. The main focus was on the role of social value orientation (SVO), social power construals and perceived ability on the ‘what’ of sharing (i.e., grant proposals, tips, advice, feedback) but also on the sharing ‘with whom’ (i.e., familiar people vs. strangers).

Again, construing power as responsibility was found to predict the sharing of private important information; it also predicted the sharing with familiar people and the sharing with strangers while no consistent SVO effects were found. Power construed as responsibility has been shown to play, in the lab and also in the real world, a more important role than SVO when it comes to SIS. Overall, this research points toward future research directions as it revealed and advanced insights into the understanding of SIS, its explanatory potential and clarifying power to decrease information asymmetries and to stimulate especially the sharing of private important information.