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The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Knowledge Acquisition and Transfer: The Mediating Roles of Employee Engagement and Autonomy

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Abstract:
In the context of digital transformation, the role of transformational leadership in the acquisition and transfer of knowledge within organizations is becoming increasingly significant. Therefore, this study aims to measure and empirically test a conceptual model that clarifies the impact of transformational leadership on knowledge acquisition and transfer, through the mediating roles of employee engagement and autonomy in Hanoi. Furthermore, the study examines the mediating relationship of employee engagement and autonomy in the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge acquisition and transfer. The research findings indicate that all four factors—transformational leadership, employee engagement, autonomy, and knowledge acquisition and transfer—interact with each other. The research data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the scales and research model. The results show that the research objectives were fully achieved. The empirical evidence demonstrates the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement, as well as the positive effects of employee engagement on autonomy and knowledge acquisition and transfer among employees. Consequently, this study contributes valuable insights to both theory and practice, and suggests new research directions for the future.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership; Knowledge Acquisition; Employee Engagement; Autonomy; Knowledge Transfer

1. Introduction

Transformational leadership has garnered significant attention in the global academic and business communities due to its profound impact on organizational performance and innovation. Studies conducted in various countries, including the United States, France, and China, have consistently demonstrated that transformational leaders, through their inspirational and motivational behaviors, significantly enhance knowledge acquisition and transfer within organizations. For instance, research in French knowledge-intensive firms revealed that transformational leadership fosters both exploitative and exploratory innovations by promoting knowledge sharing among employees (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). Similarly, a study in China highlighted that transformational leadership positively influences employee knowledge sharing through the mediating roles of psychological safety and team efficacy (Wang & Howell, 2010). Despite these findings, there remains a gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which transformational leadership impacts knowledge processes, particularly in different cultural contexts.

In Vietnam, the concept of transformational leadership is increasingly being recognized as a critical factor in driving organizational success, particularly in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Recent empirical studies conducted in Hanoi have shown that transformational leadership positively impacts the knowledge sharing behavior of employees in SMEs. A study involving 295 employees from 98 SMEs in Hanoi found that transformational leadership significantly enhances both tacit and explicit knowledge sharing, thereby contributing to the intellectual capital and overall performance of these enterprises (Nguyen et al., 2019). Another study by Tran and Le (2021) reported that transformational leadership significantly enhances employee engagement and autonomy, which in turn facilitates effective knowledge transfer within organizations. However, there is still a need for more comprehensive research to understand the role of employee engagement and autonomy in mediating these effects in the Vietnamese context.

The theoretical framework underpinning this research is grounded in the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Transformational leadership theory posits that leaders who exhibit behaviors such as intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation can effectively drive knowledge acquisition and transfer within organizations. The JD-R Model suggests that job resources, such as employee engagement and autonomy, play a crucial role in enhancing work-related outcomes. The practical implications of this research are far-reaching, as it provides empirical evidence supporting the adoption of transformational leadership practices to enhance employee engagement and autonomy. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing, organizations can improve their competitive advantage and adaptability in a rapidly changing business environment. This study aims to fill the existing research gap by examining the mediating roles of employee engagement and autonomy in the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge processes, offering actionable insights for managers and leaders.

2. Background theory and hypothesis development

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model:

The JD-R Model, introduced by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), is a theoretical framework used to examine how job demands and job resources affect employee well-being and performance. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained effort and are associated with physiological and psychological costs. Job resources, on the other hand, refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that help in achieving work goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate personal growth and development.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and expanded by Bernard M. Bass in 1985, emphasizes the ability of leaders to inspire and motivate their followers to exceed their self-interests for the collective good of the organization. This theory identifies four key components: Idealized Influence, where leaders act as role models and gain the respect and trust of their followers; Inspirational Motivation, in which leaders articulate a compelling vision that inspires and motivates; Intellectual Stimulation, where leaders challenge assumptions and encourage creativity and innovation; and Individualized Consideration, where leaders provide personalized support and mentorship, fostering the personal and professional growth of their followers.

In the context of organizational knowledge processes, transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing knowledge acquisition and transfer. By fostering a supportive and innovative culture, transformational leaders create an environment where employees feel engaged and autonomous, leading to more effective knowledge sharing and organizational learning. Research has shown that the behaviors exhibited by transformational leaders—such as providing intellectual stimulation and offering individualized consideration—are instrumental in promoting a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing, ultimately driving organizational success and competitive advantage.

Transformational leadership is known for its ability to inspire and motivate employees, leading to increased levels of work engagement. According to a study by Breevaart et al. (2014), transformational leaders enhance work engagement by fostering an environment of trust and support, which in turn motivates employees to invest their energy and effort in their work. The study found that transformational leadership behaviors such as intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration significantly predicted employee work engagement in a sample of 199 employees from various organizations (Breevaart et al., 2014). From these evidences, the study proposes the hypothesis that:

H1: Transformational Leadership affects Employee work engagement

Transformational leaders encourage autonomy by promoting an environment where employees feel empowered to make decisions and take initiative. In a study by Wang and Howell (2010), transformational leadership was found to positively influence employee autonomy, as leaders who exhibit behaviors such as inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation provide employees with the freedom and confidence to explore new ideas and take ownership of their work. This study, conducted with 205 employees from

different industries, highlighted the importance of transformational leadership in fostering a sense of autonomy among employees (Wang & Howell, 2010). From there, this study proposes that:

H2: Transformational Leadership affects Employee autonomy

Transformational leadership plays a crucial role in facilitating knowledge acquisition within organizations. Research by Eisenbeiss et al. (2008) demonstrated that transformational leaders create an environment conducive to learning by fostering trust and encouraging knowledge-sharing behaviors. The study, conducted in German knowledge-intensive firms, found that transformational leadership significantly enhanced the acquisition of new knowledge, thereby contributing to organizational innovation and performance (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008).

Similarly, transformational leadership positively influences knowledge transfer within organizations. A study by Xue, Bradley, and Liang (2011) showed that transformational leaders, through their inspirational and supportive behaviors, promote a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration. This study, which involved 287 employees from technology firms in China, found that transformational leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation significantly enhanced knowledge transfer among employees (Xue, Bradley, & Liang, 2011). From the above evidence, this study hypothesized that:

H3a: Transformational Leadership affects Acquisition

H3b: Transformational Leadership affects Knowledge Transfer

Employee work engagement

Employee work engagement is a critical factor in knowledge acquisition. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), engaged employees are more proactive and motivated to seek out new knowledge and skills. Their study, which explored the relationship between work engagement and knowledge acquisition in a sample of 321 employees from various industries, found that higher levels of work engagement were associated with increased knowledge acquisition (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Engaged employees are also more likely to share knowledge with their colleagues. Research by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) indicated that work engagement significantly predicts knowledge transfer behaviors among employees. Their study, conducted with 245 employees from different sectors, found that engaged employees are more willing to share their knowledge and expertise, thereby contributing to the overall knowledge base of the organization (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). From there, this study proposes that:

H4a: Employee work engagement affects Acquisition

H4b: Employee work engagement affects Knowledge Transfer

Employee autonomy

Employee autonomy is positively related to knowledge acquisition, as autonomy provides employees with the freedom to explore new ideas and learn independently. A study by Ryan and Deci (2000) demonstrated that autonomy-supportive work environments enhance employees' intrinsic motivation to acquire new knowledge. This study, which involved 278 employees from various organizations, found that higher levels of autonomy were associated with increased knowledge acquisition (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy also positively influences knowledge transfer. According to a study by Gagné (2009), autonomous employees are more likely to share their knowledge and expertise with others, as they feel more responsible for contributing to the organization's success. The study, conducted with 192 employees from different industries, found that employee autonomy significantly predicted knowledge transfer behaviors (Gagné, 2009). From the above evidence, this study hypothesized that:

H5a: Employee autonomy affects Acquisition

H5b: Employee autonomy affects Knowledge Transfer.

Acquisition

Employee autonomy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge acquisition. Research by Deci, Ryan, and Williams (1996) indicated that transformational leaders, by promoting autonomy, enhance employees' intrinsic motivation to acquire new knowledge. Their study, which explored this relationship in a sample of 312 employees from various organizations, found that

autonomy significantly mediated the effect of transformational leadership on knowledge acquisition (Deci, Ryan, & Williams, 1996).

Similarly, employee autonomy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge transfer. A study by Spreitzer (1995) found that transformational leaders who foster autonomy create an environment where employees are more willing to share their knowledge. The study, involving 227 employees from different sectors, demonstrated that autonomy significantly mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge transfer (Spreitzer, 1995). From there, this study proposes that:

H6a: Employee autonomy affecting the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Acquisition

H6b: Employee autonomy affecting the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge Transfer

Employee work engagement also mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge acquisition. Research by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) suggested that transformational leaders enhance work engagement, which in turn increases employees' motivation to acquire new knowledge. Their study, which examined this relationship in a sample of 354 employees from various organizations, found that work engagement significantly mediated the effect of transformational leadership on knowledge acquisition (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Finally, employee work engagement mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge transfer. A study by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) indicated that transformational leaders, by fostering work engagement, promote knowledge-sharing behaviors among employees. This study, conducted with 298 employees from different industries, found that work engagement significantly mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge transfer (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). From the above evidence, this study hypothesized that:

H7a: Employee work engagement affecting the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Acquisition

H7b: Employee work engagement affecting the relationship between Transformational Leadership and Knowledge Transfer

From these hypotheses, the research model is depicted in Figure 1 as follows:

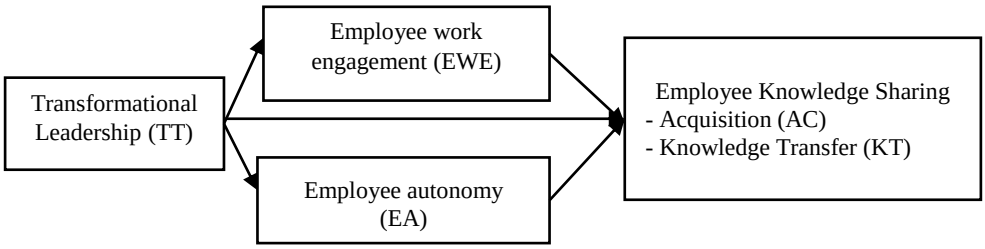


Figure 1. Research models

3. Research Methods

3.1 Questionnaire design

3.2. Data collection

The main purpose of this study is to study the impact of transformational leadership on knowledge acquisition and transfer. Therefore, the research object of this topic is the collection of employees at small and medium enterprises in Hanoi city. The author applied the simple random sampling method through the experimental questionnaire. The questionnaire included 31 main questions, so the sample size was about 620. This study was conducted for three months. Finally, a total of 903 valid questionnaires were collected after the survey. The demographic information of the respondents is described as follows:

Table 1: Demographic Statistics

Factors	Component	Amount	%
Gender	Male	475	52.6
	Female	428	47.4
Age	Under 25	250	27.7
	From 25 to 35	411	45.5
	From 35 to 45	186	20.6
	Over 45	56	6.2
Education	Other	66	7.3
	College	148	16.4
	University	258	28.6
	After university	298	33.0
	High school or vocational high school	133	14.7
Income	Under 7 million VND	86	9.5
	From 7 to15 million VND	384	42.5
	From 15 to 25 million VND	310	34.3
	Over 25 million VND	123	13.6

4. Research results

The study was conducted using quantitative research methods, through direct interviews and detailed questionnaires. All collected data were coded, entered, and cleaned using SPSS 22 and AMOS 24 software. This method is most suitable because it focuses on the relationships between variables in the model and is suitable for small samples (n = 903). In the model, transformational leadership not only directly affects knowledge sharing but also indirectly through the mediating role of employee engagement and autonomy. The relationships are linked together to create engagement and achieve the desired results.

4.1 Evaluation of reliability measurement

To evaluate the scales, the study used the evaluation criteria Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Ca) with Ca > 0.6 and the correlation coefficient of total variables > 0.3. Variables that do not satisfy this criterion will be considered as low confidence variables or garbage variables and will be excluded. Where, the Ca value due to the verb ranges from 0.895 to 0.959, all of which are greater than 0.6. The results obtained are shown in the tables below:

Table 2: Reliability statistics

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha (Ca)
Transformational Leadership (TL)	0.927
Employee work engagement (EWE)	0.925
Employee autonomy (EA)	0.959
Acquisition (AC)	0.946
Knowledge Transfer (KT)	0.895

The results of the test of the scale of the factor groups. Through the analysis data, it can be seen that, all Crobach's alpha values of the variable are greater than 0.5. This shows that the above 5 groups of factors are eligible to analyze the next steps.

4.2 Exploratory factor analysis EFA

After evaluating the standard scales, all 5 groups of factors are eligible to be the basis for conducting EFA analysis. The results of exploratory factor analysis EFA gave the following results:

Table 3: Results of EFA analysis

Factors	Test value

KMO	0.946
Sig value in Bartlett's test	0.000
Total variance extracted	74.814
Eigenvalue	1.282

Numerical value KMO= 0.946 (0.5≤ KMO ≤1); sig = 0.000 (<1%) is statistically significant. This result means that the variables are correlated with each other in the population and that the application of factor analysis is appropriate.

Pattern Matrix results are shown in the table below:

Table 4: Pattern Matrix Table

	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
EA7	.918				
EA4	.905				
EA6	.893				
EA1	.871				
EA3	.859				
EA5	.858				
EA2	.829				
TL6		.972			
TL4		.797			
TL7		.794			
TL3		.793			
TL2		.741			
TL5		.725			
TL1		.682			
EWE6			.884		
EWE5			.866		
EWE2			.835		
EWE4			.787		
EWE3			.787		
EWE1			.753		
AC2				.891	
AC6				.889	
AC4				.863	
AC5				.855	
AC3				.798	
AC1				.770	
KT4					.880
KT5					.807
KT3					.792
KT1					.753
KT2					.719

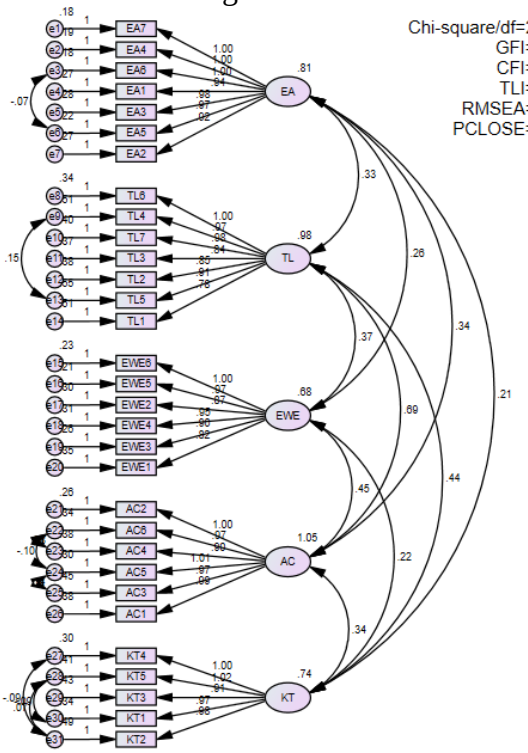
There are 5 groups of factors extracted from the initial indicator (because all 5 groups of factors have Eigenvalue>1 and the sum of extracted variance of 1 main factor is 74.814% (>50%), the extracted factors explain 74.814% of the variation of the survey data, so it can be confirmed that the data is suitable to represent factor analysis. Based on this result, we proceed to implement CFA.

4.3 Confirmatory factor analysis CFA

It is necessary to determine the conditions to measure the fit of the model with the data to ensure the unidirectionality of the observed variable set (Hu & Bentler, 1999). To determine this relevance, this study uses the following criteria: CMIN, CMIN/df, CFI, GFI, TLI, RMSEA index and PCLOSE.

Results after analyzing CFA, we have: CMIN/df= 2.829 (CMIN/df ≤3); GFI= 0.923 (GFI>9); CFI=0.968 (CFI≥0.95); TLI=0.965 (TLI≥0.95); RMSEA=0.045 (RMSEA≤0.06); PCLOSE=0.997 (PCLOSE≥0.05).

Figure 2: CFA model



Thus, the results of CFA analysis show that the measurement model is consistent with the actual data. And to continue the study, we consider the reliability, convergence and discriminant validity of the scales.

The test results are satisfactory and are shown in the following tables:

Table 5. Normalized load factor

No	Relationship			Estimate	No	Relationship			Estimate
1	EA7	<---	EA	.906	15	EWE6	<---	EWE	.866
2	EA4	<---	EA	.899	16	EWE5	<---	EWE	.868
3	EA6	<---	EA	.903	17	EWE2	<---	EWE	.795
4	EA1	<---	EA	.853	18	EWE4	<---	EWE	.817
5	EA3	<---	EA	.859	19	EWE3	<---	EWE	.824
6	EA5	<---	EA	.881	20	EWE1	<---	EWE	.755
7	EA2	<---	EA	.846	21	AC2	<---	AC	.895
8	TL6	<---	TL	.862	22	AC6	<---	AC	.862
9	TL4	<---	TL	.801	23	AC4	<---	AC	.830
10	TL7	<---	TL	.836	24	AC5	<---	AC	.883

11	TL3	<---	TL	.805	25	AC3	<---	AC	.830
12	TL2	<---	TL	.806	26	AC1	<---	AC	.856
13	TL5	<---	TL	.769	27	KT4	<---	KT	.842
14	TL1	<---	TL	.734	28	KT5	<---	KT	.808
					29	KT3	<---	KT	.768
					30	KT1	<---	KT	.822
					31	KT2	<---	KT	.771

First, to test the reliability, the study evaluates the normalized load factor (≥0.5) and the combined reliability (CR≥0.7). Next, to test the convergence of the evaluation study based on the AVE index (≥0.5). Finally, to be discriminant, the MSV indices must be less than the corresponding AVE; also, the SQRTAVE index must be greater than the Inter-Construct Correlations index .

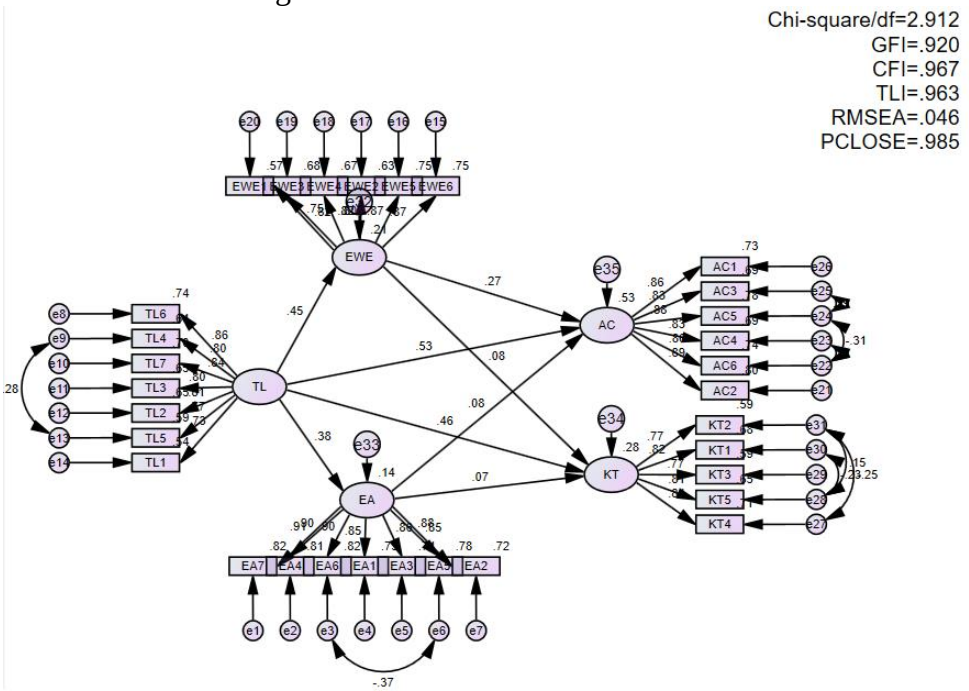
Table 6: CR, AVE, MSV and SQRTAVE assessment results

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	EA	TL	EWE	AC	KT
EA	0.959	0.772	0.138	0.961	**0.879**				
TL	0.927	0.644	0.458	0.930	0.371***	**0.803**			
EWE	0.926	0.675	0.284	0.930	0.353***	0.447***	**0.822**		
AC	0.944	0.739	0.458	0.946	0.371***	0.676***	0.533***	**0.860**	
KT	0.900	0.644	0.266	0.903	0.272***	0.516***	0.308***	0.386***	**0.803**

4.4. Test model and research hypothesis

The test results show that the analytical criteria all meet the necessary standards, confirming that the research model is consistent with the collected data. Specifically: CMIN/df= 2.912 (CMIN/df ≤3); GFI= 0.920 (GFI>9); CFI=0.967 (CFI≥0.95); TLI=0.963 (TLI≥0.95); RMSEA=0.046 (RMSEA≤0.06); PCLOSE=0.985 (PCLOSE≥0.05).

Figure 3: SEM linear structure model



Through statistical indicators, the author tests the proposed research hypotheses. The results of SEM analysis for all relationships are statistically significant with 95% confidence (p<0.05) and the relationships have a positive effect on each other because of the positive estimation coefficient.

Table 7. Regression weight table

Hypothesis	Relationship			Estimate	SE	CR	P
H1	EWE	<--	TL	.380	.029	13.113	***
H2	EA	<--	TL	.346	.031	11.132	***
H3a	AC	<--	TL	.549	.035	15.497	***
H3b	KT	<--	TL	.397	.035	11.193	***
H4a	AC	<--	EWE	.330	.037	8.829	***
H4b	AC	<--	EA	.092	.031	2.940	.003
H5a	KT	<--	EWE	.079	.038	2.098	.036
H5b	KT	<--	EA	.071	.032	2.212	.027

From the table of results and concluding the meanings of the above values, the author conducts testing of the proposed research hypotheses. Specifically, the hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H5 are accepted (P-value < 0.05).

Through the standardized estimation coefficient, we can determine the degree of influence between the factors, from which it is possible to assess the importance of each factor in affecting online trust and public services. (TT) are PB(0.654) and PR (-0.194), respectively; while the factors affecting the decision to use online public services (OPS), we can identify two factors that positively affect OPS, respectively TT (0.389); PB(0.292) and a negative influence factor is PR (-0.226)

Table 8. Table of intermediate relationships

Hypothesis	Relationship	Unnormalized estimate	LLCI	ULCI	P-value (Sig)	Normalized estimate
H6a	TL --> EWE --> AC	0.125	0.099	0.157	0.001	0.121***
H6b	TL --> EWE --> KT	0.030	0.007	0.055	0.047	0.034*
H7a	TL --> EA --> AC	0.032	0.010	0.052	0.019	0.031*
H7b	TL --> EA --> KT	0.025	0.005	0.047	0.040	0.028*

By using Indirect effects, we get the results as in the above table, we see that the variable EWE and EA have an intermediate role in influencing the relationship between TL and AC, TL and KT (because p<0.05).

The analysis results show that the mediating relationship of EWE and EA are significant. From the table of research results above, the author tests the proposed research hypotheses. Specifically, hypotheses H6, H7 are all accepted.

Finally, in the Squared Multiple Correlations table, we have statistically significant independent variables that affect 20.6% of the data variation of the TT variable; 14.4% of the data variation of the EA variable; 27.8% of the data variation of the KT variable and represent 52.7% of the data AC variation

5. Conclusion and discussion.

The results of this study provide significant insights into the impact of transformational leadership on knowledge acquisition and transfer, mediated by employee work engagement and autonomy. The hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 were all supported, indicating that transformational leadership positively influences employee work engagement (H1: Estimate = 0.380, SE = 0.029, $p < 0.001$), employee autonomy (H2: Estimate = 0.346, SE = 0.031, $p < 0.001$), knowledge acquisition (H3a: Estimate = 0.549, SE = 0.035, $p < 0.001$), and knowledge transfer (H3b: Estimate = 0.397, SE = 0.035, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, employee work engagement was found to positively affect knowledge acquisition (H4a: Estimate = 0.330, SE = 0.037, $p < 0.001$) and, to a lesser extent, knowledge transfer (H5a: Estimate = 0.079, SE = 0.038, $p = 0.036$). Employee autonomy also had a significant positive effect on both knowledge acquisition (H4b: Estimate = 0.092, SE = 0.031, $p = 0.003$) and knowledge transfer (H5b: Estimate = 0.071, SE = 0.032, $p = 0.027$).

The mediating roles of employee work engagement and autonomy were confirmed through the significant indirect effects observed in the study. Employee work engagement significantly mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge acquisition (H6a: Unnormalized estimate = 0.125, $p < 0.001$) and knowledge transfer (H6b: Unnormalized estimate = 0.030, $p = 0.047$). Similarly, employee autonomy significantly mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge acquisition (H7a: Unnormalized estimate = 0.032, $p = 0.019$) and knowledge transfer (H7b: Unnormalized estimate = 0.025, $p = 0.040$). These findings highlight the critical roles of employee engagement and autonomy in enhancing the effectiveness of transformational leadership in promoting knowledge processes within organizations.

The theoretical contributions of this research are twofold. First, it extends the understanding of transformational leadership by demonstrating its positive impact on knowledge acquisition and transfer through the mediating roles of employee work engagement and autonomy. This aligns with the foundational principles of the Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Second, the study addresses a gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence from the Vietnamese context, where the adoption of transformational leadership practices is gaining momentum, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for managers and leaders. By adopting transformational leadership practices, such as providing intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation, leaders can significantly enhance employee engagement and autonomy. These, in turn, facilitate effective knowledge acquisition and transfer, contributing to the overall success and competitiveness of the organization. Managers are encouraged to create an environment that supports continuous learning and knowledge sharing, thereby leveraging the full potential of their workforce.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of transformational leadership in fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and innovation. The mediating roles of employee work engagement and autonomy are pivotal in this process, highlighting the need for leaders to focus on engaging and empowering their employees to drive organizational success. Future research could further explore the influence of cultural factors on the effectiveness of transformational leadership in different contexts, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on knowledge processes.

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