Chapter III
Addressing Contextual Issues in Knowledge Management: A Guiding Framework

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversity and wide disparities in the extent of up-to-date infrastructure make managing knowledge challenging in developing countries, even as the urgent human needs in these countries make knowledge management (KM) especially valuable as a tool in economic and human development. Cultural diversity and infrastructural gap issues are also related to a variety of government, educational, political, social, and economic factors. These environmental factors interact with organizational variables and information technology to enable or constrain knowledge management processes in the creation and protection of knowledge resources. Case studies in India, The Gambia, and Nigeria are used to develop an empirically grounded contextual framework of knowledge management (KM). This guiding framework is intended to help organizations address contextual issues in knowledge management, leading to better preparation, implementation, and assessment of KM projects.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural diversity and wide disparities in the extent of up-to-date infrastructure make managing knowledge challenging in developing countries, even as the urgent human needs in these countries make knowledge management (KM) especially valuable as a tool in economic and human development (Bertaux, Okunoye, & Abu-Rashed, 2005; Bertaux, Okunoye, & Oyelami, 2005). Cultural diversity and infrastructural gap issues are also related to a variety of government, educational, political, social and economic factors. These environmental factors interact with organizational
variables and information technology to enable or constrain knowledge management processes in the creation and protection of knowledge resources. Case studies in India, The Gambia, and Nigeria are used to develop an empirically grounded contextual framework of knowledge management (KM). This guiding framework is intended to help organizations address contextual issues in knowledge management, leading to better preparation, implementation and assessment of KM projects.

How are knowledge management (KM) frameworks helpful to organizations? KM frameworks can assist us in establishing a focus for KM efforts (Earl, 2001; Shankar & Gupta, 2005). These frameworks can also help organizations to approach KM methodically and consciously. They can help to identify a specific approach to KM, to define goals and strategies, to understand the various knowledge management initiatives, and then to choose the best ones for the particular circumstances (Earl, 2001; Maier & Remus, 2001).

There have been several proposed frameworks to guide KM efforts in organizations. However, these frameworks do not address KM across the full spectrum of organizational needs (Calaberese, 2000; Shankar & Gupta, 2005), but instead address certain KM elements. There is therefore a need for a comprehensive KM framework that considers the full range of organizational dimensions.

A number of reviews and models (Holsapple & Joshi, 1999; Lai & Chu, 2000; Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001; Shankar & Gupta, 2005; Bennet & Tomblin, 2006; Montequin et al., 2006) have discussed the components and assumptions of the frameworks proposed to date. There appears to be a consensus on the need for a more generalized framework, and, consequently, these authors also outline recommendations regarding such a framework. All agree that the basic components should be knowledge resources, KM processes and influences. Even though the existing and the suggested frameworks recognize varying organizational contexts, they have not considered differences in the operating environmental contexts. This is similar to the IS literature, where very few studies address global diversity (Walsham, 2001; Avgerou, 2002).

The importance of the local operating environmental context has already received some attention in e-commerce (Simon, 2001), ERP (Wassenar et al., 2002) and information systems development methodology research (INDEHELA Project, 1999). Also, King et al. (1994) comprehensively discuss institutional factors in information technology innovation. In knowledge management, however, there is a basic need for consideration of the diverse environmental context and how it could influence other issues involved. The framework described here is designed to address that need, by focusing on the local cultural and infrastructural factors that could interact with organizational factors and information technology and the resultant effect on knowledge processes and resources.

GLOBAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY MATTERS

Global cultural diversity has profound implications for the effective design and implementation of knowledge management (KM) projects. Thus, our view on global cultural diversity recognizes the existence of different organizational contexts and great care must be taken when making assumptions about patterns of organizational performance and innovations (Avgerou, 2002). For example, the wide gap in the availability and use of ICT across the world, and the influences ICT exerts on globalization, raise questions about the feasibility and desirability of efforts to implement the development of ICT through the transfer of best practices from Western industrialized countries to developing countries, and whether organizations can utilize such ICT in accordance with the socio-cultural requirements of the contexts (Avgerou, 1998; Morales-Gomez & Melesse, 1998; Walsham,