Chapter IX
A Conceptual Model for Knowledge Sharing as Dependent on Cultural Factors

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ABSTRACT

Often, organizational members are separated not only geographically but also culturally. Information technology has inevitably become a facilitator of knowledge sharing. However, earlier studies have posited that culture can significantly facilitate or hinder knowledge sharing in culturally diverse teams. Greater enlightenment on the cultural effect is therefore a useful contribution to understanding the most effective way of managing knowledge sharing in organizations. However, little effort has been put into dimensioning culture in such a way as to enable comparative and large scale study. This investigation tries to fill this gap by bringing together and examining the few attempts at dimensioning this concept. This review results in the proposing of cultural dimensions which are grouped into organizational and societal classes. The review also results in a proposal of a conceptual model that expresses knowledge sharing to be a function of organizational and societal cultural factors. We formulated two major hypotheses: H1—There is a high positive relationship between organizational culture and knowledge sharing, and H2—There is a high positive relationship between societal culture and knowledge sharing. The model requires further investigation as explained in the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The current globalisation trend has promoted multi-cultural groups. Sometimes, a multi-cultural group is geographically spread and thus fit Malhotra and Majchrzak’s (2004) description of “far flung teams.” Whether such a group is located in one building or are scattered around the world, information systems most likely constitute a central facilitator for knowledge sharing among
the group members (Kuofie, 2005). Knowledge sharing requires more than information and communications technology per se. There is need for other crucial elements such as trust (Sharratt & Usoro, 2003; Zakaria et al., 2004) and shared understanding or “a collective way of organising relevant knowledge” (Hinds & Weisband, 2003, p. 21; Kuofie, 2005).

Knowledge sharing is generally conceived as an exchange (of knowledge) from a giver to a receiver. The receiver is not passively taking “knowledge.” The receiver’s perception of what is shared is influenced, inter alia, by his or her cultural background. According to Zakaria et al. (2004) “knowledge is filtered through cultural lenses, whether we are aware of such filters or not” (p. 16). Research in management recognizes organizational culture as affecting team performance and hence knowledge sharing (Kuofie, 2005). Culture has to be examined beyond the organizational to the national or societal level especially for global teams who are scattered in different cultural contexts in which they may belong. The use of the term “societal culture” is preferred because cultural boundaries do not often coincide with national boundaries (Kreittner & Kinicki, 2002, p. 88). The northern part of Nigeria, for instance, shares the same Arabic culture as the countries above Nigeria. There is current interest in researching the knowledge-sharing environment of global teams but little is done on the cultural element of the environment. The few studies (e.g., Ardichvili et al., 2006) are mainly qualitative and exploratory.

This chapter aims to identify the cultural elements that could influence knowledge sharing among multi-cultural groups whether or not they are globally located.

The rest of the chapter is organized into (a) culture, (b) organizational culture, (c) societal culture, (d) proposed conceptual model, (e) conclusion and areas for further investigations.

CULTURE

Culture is a concept that may be elusive to define, but because of its pervasive nature can undoubtedly be perceived among a group of people just as personality can be perceived in an individual. Geert Hofstede (2003) describes it as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group or category of people from another” (p. 89). Hofstede’s mention of the mind indicates that culture has to do with the way we think and interpret information that comes to us. For example, a Nigerian in the UK would find it very unwelcoming if s/he is constantly asked how long s/he is staying in the UK though the enquirers are friendly and mean no harm. In Nigerian culture, it is a taboo to ask your visitor how long s/he is staying. The question is interpreted to mean you are asking the guest to leave immediately. To shake hands or not to, to say good morning to strangers or not to, to grow your hair or not to, and to express emotions or not may be determined by culture. “May” because culture makes a group of people tend to think and act in a particular way; culture is not deterministic, as suggested by Hofstede by the use of the word “programming”, of the working of the mind of every member of a particular culture. As a free morale agent, an individual can decide to be different from his cultural group at least in some aspects of the group’s culture. It is not impossible, for instance, to meet an African who is highly formal in his general communication with people, though African culture is broadly defined as informal in their communication.

Knowledge sharing, like communication, is carried out within a cultural context. The receiver interprets information s/he receives using his or her cultural perspective. In face-to-face communication, voice cues and body language is used to enhance the meaning of information shared. Except with video-conferencing, much of communication enhancements may be missing,