The Impact of National Cultural Values on Intrinsic Motivation to Transfer Tacit Knowledge

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the moderating effects of individuals’ national cultural values on intrinsic motivation to engage in tacit knowledge transfer, through the lens of knowledge coaching. Using partial least squares analysis, survey data from 26 district managers (knowledge coaches) and 102 territory managers (protégés) from a large MNC’s subsidiaries in Denmark, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Sweden and the UK is examined. In the first model, appertaining to the knowledge coaches, long-term orientation positively moderated the path between intrinsic motivation and perceived selling skill acquisition. For the corresponding pathway in the protégé model, collectivism and power distance attenuated the pathway. The implications for managers in terms of fostering intrinsic motivation to engage in knowledge transfer across a diversity of employees, and avenues for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Collectivism, Competence, Knowledge Coaching, Long-Term Orientation, Power Distance, Relatedness

INTRODUCTION
Knowledge transfer (KT) has rapidly emerged as a critical, cross-disciplinary issue. According to the knowledge-based view of the firm, knowledge serves as a principal source of competitive advantage (Spender & Grant, 1996). To put this in perspective, the approaching retirement of the baby boomer generation presents a looming threat to the corporate memory of human capital organisations, that rely on scarce expert talent as a means of offering value to their customers (Foss, 2007). Such a threat warrants urgent research, to better understand the influencers of KT effectiveness, so that valuable knowledge can be properly passed on to the next generation of employees.

While there is a plethora of research on inter-organisational KT and the factors that maximise or inhibit its effectiveness (see Van Wijk, Jansen & Lyles, 2008), research on effective intra-organisational knowledge transfer is surprisingly lacking. Further, Wilkesmann, Fischer and Wilkesmann (2009) note that the bulk of the literature regarding KT has focused on organisational and network characteristics when attempting to better understand how to maximise KT effectiveness. This finding is reflected in meta-analyses (Jacks, Wallace & Nemati, 2012), revealing the clear dominance of studies analysing the effects of organisational culture and leadership on knowledge processes. Thus, there have been extensive calls for research on person-level influencers of KT effectiveness (Rechberg & Syed, 2014).
Recent studies have shown that self-efficacy (Cabrera, Collins & Salgado, 2006; Kalman, 1999), Big Five personality dimensions (Cho, Zheng & Su, 2007; Matzler, Renzl, Mooradian, von Krogh & Mueller, 2011), and organisational commitment (Cabrera, Collins & Salgado, 2006) all bear an influence on KT and knowledge sharing behaviours. However, despite the fact that national culture has exhibited substantial predictive power in organisation-level models of knowledge transfer motivation and effectiveness (Magnier, Watanabe & Senoo, 2010), there is yet to be an individual-level analysis of national cultural values’ impact on KT. This research therefore seeks to examine whether national cultural values bear an influence on intra-organisational KT motivation, and thus, whether consideration of national cultural values can aid in the development of more parsimonious models of intra-organisational KT effectiveness.

In order to strengthen the growing body of knowledge management literature, this paper analyses the moderating role of individually possessed national cultural values on intrinsic motivation to transfer tacit knowledge, while taking care to avoid fallacious treatments of culture as unvarying and monolithic. Such a contribution is unique given that the literature combining the areas of motivation, national cultural values and knowledge management is notably sparse. This is perhaps due to the ecological clumsiness involved in combining the three areas; studies on national culture are usually focused on the country level, the overwhelming majority of the knowledge management literature is on the organisational level (Minbaeva, Mäkelä & Rabbiosi, 2012), while studies on motivation are usually on the individual level due to their roots in behavioural psychology.

This paper contributes to the knowledge management literature by examining all three of these factors at the person-level, in order to better understand the variables that facilitate or inhibit the effective transfer of individually possessed tacit knowledge. This is achieved through an examination of knowledge coaching relationships, which are utilised as a window into the relative influences of motivation and national culture on individual-level KT. Bringing knowledge coaching – a highly effective mechanism for knowledge transfer – to the level of managers’ consciousness, and understanding the influencers of its effectiveness stands to benefit organisations enormously. However, our focus on knowledge coaches does not limit the generalisability of our findings in terms of their applicability to other contexts for tacit KT, such as through formal training programs.

The remainder of this article will proceed as follows. First, the knowledge and KT literature will be reviewed and the practice of knowledge coaching will be explained. Following this, the impact of intrinsic motivation on KT effectiveness will be explored through the theoretical lens of cognitive evaluation theory (CET; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Next, national cultural values and their hypothesised impacts on the models’ pathways will be introduced in the conceptual development section. This will be followed by a description of the study’s methods and the results of the analysis. The article will conclude with a discussion of the findings and their subsequent implications for managers and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the twentieth century, knowledge was “… much talked about but little understood” (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001, p. 973). Compounding this obscurity was the trend among some researchers to explicitly discourage the development of a working definition of knowledge (Fahey & Prusak, 1998). Many even advocated the interchangeable use of the terms data, information and knowledge. Since the turn of the century however, there has been a sudden reemergence of interest in knowledge management, sparking efforts to establish a clear definition of knowledge.

As leaders in the field of knowledge management upon whose work much of the recent literature builds, this work assumes Nonaka, Umemoto and Senoo’s (1996, p. 205) definition of knowledge, defining it as “… a meaningful set of information that constitutes a justified true belief and/or an embodied technical skill.” Inherent in this conceptualisation of knowledge is the notion that the known can never be entirely divorced from the knower and is symbiotically rooted in action, experience and
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