Chapter XXI

Cultural Issues, Organizations and Information Fulfillment: An Exploration towards Improved Knowledge Management Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to consider an original way of improving Knowledge Management relationships. This is done within the context of an aspect of Information behaviour, known as Information Fulfillment. The chapter presents the cultural results of a three-year study into the concept of information fulfillment, and considers the impact of culture on levels of information fulfillment. Ethnographic studies were undertaken within higher education institutions in four countries and the social and symbolic meanings that underpinned the culture of information in the chosen institutions are presented followed by a section of “raw data” from the ethnographic field. Culture impacted significantly in all the studies, and each study had its own unique character and provided rich insights into the culture and contexts of the fields. The relationships between the cultures and the levels of information fulfillment are reported with suggestions re helping build KM systems that deliver higher levels of information fulfillment.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) systems may fail or be abandoned if they do not result in the information fulfillment that they promise. However, levels of information fulfillment are affected by cultural factors, which differ between institutions, and to understand this relationship it is necessary to bring together aspects of information seeking and to establish what kinds of relationships can
be found between types of organization structure and levels of information fulfillment, while taking into account cultural differences. This chapter focuses upon the impact of culture on levels of information fulfillment, through presentation and analysis of the cultural results of a three-year study into the concept of information fulfillment, using case studies of higher education institutions in four countries.

Between 2002 and 2005, a funded research project explored issues surrounding organization structures, and examined levels of information fulfillment in microsubstantive settings, within institutions in Poland, Hungary, Russia and the UK. Interpretive ethnographic studies were undertaken by examining each organization’s structure (e.g. bureaucratic, matrix etc.) and comparing this with the level of information fulfillment achieved. It is the social and symbolic meanings that underpinned the culture of information in the chosen institutions that form the basis of this chapter. By understanding how cultural factors can affect information fulfillment it becomes possible to see what determines whether a KM system is hailed a success or branded a failure by those who use it, and how to build KM systems associated with high levels of information fulfillment.

The impact of culture on levels of information fulfillment is considered throughout six stages. First, a discussion is presented of the relationship between information fulfillment and knowledge management. Second, a review is given of the place of information fulfillment in established information models. This is followed by the third section, which contains a discussion of the cultural frameworks used to underpin each of the institutions. The fourth part of the chapter allows for analysis of the way in which the term was interpreted and used in each of the cultural environments. The fifth part of the chapter presents an assessment of the impact of the cultures on the levels of information fulfillment. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion regarding the building of knowledge management systems that can be designed to encourage and achieve high levels of information fulfillment.

Defining Culture, Information Fulfillment and Knowledge Management

Whilst defining culture is a difficult task, it is important to do so in order to put the research into context. Allaire (1984) provided a typology of school of thought in cultural anthropology and found that a useful metaphor for viewing culture is about “decay, (of one culture), adaption (to a new culture), resulting in radical cultural shifts and change”.

Whilst metaphors of culture are useful Adler (1983) created a typology of management studies involving culture and defined culture as all embracing, atmospheric and about the fundamentals of values and beliefs. This definition is more useful for our studies in this paper and so we will use this as the main definition.

The second concept, information fulfillment can be defined by taking a step back and considering first a wider view – that of information systems. Systems utilize the available technology in order to undertake particular parts of the information management process - including careful planning of the way in which the information flows within the organization structure - resulting in overall improved control of the way in which the information is managed. Due to the continuous nature of change in the external environment of an organization, it is critical that managers of the organization are able to respond quickly to these changes by making prompt good quality decisions. To enhance this process, an area of research within information management known as “information seeking”, or more properly as “information seeking behavior”, examines the ways in which people find the information they require. Information seeking can itself be defined as a study of how and where people look for solutions to information problems.
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