Conceptualisation of Cultural Dimensions as a Major Influence on Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

Information technology has inevitably become a facilitator of knowledge sharing. Often, organisational members are separated not only geographically but also culturally. Earlier studies have posited that culture can significantly facilitate or hinder knowledge sharing in culturally diverse teams. Greater enlightenment on the cultural effect is a useful contribution to understanding the most effective way of managing knowledge sharing in organisations. 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 organisational and societal classes. The proposal is in the form of a theoretical model that requires further investigation as explained in the paper.

Keywords: behaviour; culture; knowledge sharing; knowledge workers

INTRODUCTION

The current globalisation trend has promoted multi-cultural groups. Whether such groups are located in one building or are scattered around the world, information systems are most likely to constitute a central facilitator for knowledge sharing among the group members. 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, Amelinckx, & Wilemon, 2004) and shared understanding, or “a collective way of organising relevant knowledge” (Hinds & Weisband, 2003, p. 21).

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 recognises organisational culture as affecting team performance and hence knowledge sharing. Culture has to be examined beyond the organisational to the national or societal level, especially for global teams that 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 Arab 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. This conceptual paper 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 paper is organised into culture, organisational culture, societal culture, and summary, 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. 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 woman in the UK would find it very unwelcoming if she is constantly asked how long she is staying in the UK though the inquirers are friendly and mean no harm. In Nigerian culture it is a taboo to ask your visitor (who often turns up without notice) how long he or she is staying. The question is interpreted to mean you are asking the guest to leave immediately. To shake hands or not, to say good morning to strangers or not, to grow your hair or not, and to express emotions or not may be determined by culture. “May” because culture makes a group of people to 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 its communication.

Knowledge sharing, like communication, is carried out within a cultural context. The receiver interprets information he or she receives using her cultural perspective. In face-to-face communication, voice cues and body language are used to enhance the meaning of information shared. Except with video conferencing, much of communication enhancements may be missing, therefore enhancing the use of the default context — culture — to assign meaning to communication. The cultural context that influences team members can be described as organisational and societal (Kreittner & Kinicki, 2002).

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

We cannot attempt to investigate organisational culture without attempting to define it. Studies of organisational culture are characterised by variation in definition, and mainly qualitative rather than quantitative methods are used for investigation (Kreittner and Kinicki, 2002, p. 69). Schein (1999) views organisational culture as “the way we do things around here. In essence, corporate culture is the learned, shared, and tacit assumptions such as values, beliefs, and assumptions” (p. 48). Core values or basic assumptions form the foundation of organisational culture. These values are exhibited in practices and individual behaviour. They are also embedded in artifacts (e.g. space and buildings); stories, legends, and myths; espoused philosophy and values; and structure and systems.
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