Social Structures and Personal Values That Predict E-Mail Use: An International Comparative Study

Mark F. Peterson, Florida Atlantic University, USA and Maastricht University, Netherlands
Stephanie J. Thomason, University of Tampa, USA
Norm Althouse, University of Calgary, Canada
Nicholas Athanassiou, Northeastern University, USA
Gudrun Curri, Dalhousie University, Canada
Robert Konopaske, Texas State University, USA
Tomasz Lenartowicz, Florida Atlantic University, USA
Mark Meckler, University of Portland, USA
Mark E. Mendenhall, University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, USA
Andrew A. Mogaji, Benue State University, Nigeria
Julie I. A. Rowney, University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article extends communication and technology use theories about factors that predict e-mail use by explaining the reasons for cultural contingencies in the effects of managers’ personal values and the social structures (roles, rules and norms) that are most used in their work context. Results from a survey of 576 managers from Canada, the English-speaking Caribbean, Nigeria, and the United States indicate that e-mail use may support participative and lateral decision making, as it is positively associated with work contexts that show high reliance on staff specialists especially in the U.S., subordinates, and unwritten rules especially in Nigeria and Canada. The personal value of self-direction is positively related to e-mail use in Canada, while security is negatively related to e-mail use in the United States. The results have implications for further development of TAM and media characteristic theories as well as for training about media use in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: E-Mail Use, National Culture, Personal Values, Schwartz Value Survey, Social Structures, Sources of Meaning, Technology Acceptance Model

DOI: 10.4018/jgim.2010040103
INTRODUCTION

Managers everywhere have come to consider e-mail to be as ordinary a communication medium for discussing work events as are the telephone, fax, written documents, and face-to-face conversations. Despite its common use, the distinctive informal, explicitly written, easily transmitted qualities of e-mail make it a more comfortable medium for managers with some cultural backgrounds, values, and work contexts to use than for others (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). Managers of organizations that have divisions in multiple nations need to be trained to become aware of the typical use of e-mail in different parts of their organization to effectively manage cross-border interactions (MacDuffie, 2008) and disseminate company information to large audiences in nations other than their own. More generally, managers in all organizations need to be trained about possible differences between their own preference about e-mail use and the preference of their communication partners. Differences in e-mail use preferences, whether rooted in cultural differences, personal differences, or differences in organizational practices, have the potential to create misunderstandings of messages and interpersonal stresses. Organizational training to keep managers aware of such differences has the potential to promote cross-cultural communication in buyer-seller relationships, inter-organizational collaborative arrangements, and the many interpersonal contacts that occur in multinational organizations. A major contribution of projects like the present one is to provide information that can be used to adapt such training to particular cultural settings. In particular, we consider which personal and organizational characteristics associated with e-mail use preferences are unique to particular nations and which ones are relatively universal among English-speaking nations that differ substantially in their cultural and socioeconomic situation.

The present study contributes to the international communication and technology literatures about factors predicting the tendency of managers to use e-mail by drawing from cross-cultural and psychology research about personal values and social structures. One of these cross-cultural literatures deals with cultural characteristics of the nation in which one lives (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). These are characteristics that one may personally value or not value, but that a nation’s members inevitably know well, through long experience have come to find normal, and are more likely to prefer than are members of other nations. A second is the literature about personal values (Rokeach, 1968; Schwartz, 1994). While knowing a nation very well for all of one’s life and regularly facing influence to conform to its norms can affect one’s personal values, expressed values can still show considerable within-nation variability (Au, 1999). The third is the social structure literature rooted in role theory about the links of individual managers to members of their role set and to impersonal social forces like organizational and societal norms (Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002). Specifically, the social structures we consider include the self, role senders such as superiors, subordinates, co-workers, colleagues, specialists, friends, family, formal organizational rules and procedures, and norms including both unwritten organizational rules, and beliefs that are widespread in one’s nation (Peterson & Smith, 2000). Interest in social structures is represented to a limited degree in the larger body of international comparative research built on surveys of values. For example, studies of national culture (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004) and personal values (e.g., Schwartz, 1994) typically include variables like power distance that includes reliance on people in authority as an element, collectivism that includes relying on friends and colleagues, and uncertainty avoidance that includes reliance on rules. The comparative research we follow in our treatment of social structures draws from role theory (Biddle & Thomas, 1966; Kahn et al., 1964) by directly representing reliance on different categories of roles, rules, and norms in organizations rather than inferring it from national cultural values (e.g., Smith, Peterson, & Schwartz, 2002).
Mapping the Diffusion of the Internet Technology Cluster: An Examination of Irish SMEs
www.igi-global.com/chapter/mapping-diffusion-internet-technology-cluster/19074?camid=4v1a

The Role of Information Technology in the “Fit” Between Culture, Business Strategy and Organizational Structure of Global Firms
www.igi-global.com/article/role-information-technology-fit-between/3537?camid=4v1a