A Dialectic on the Cultural and Political Aspects of Information and Knowledge Sharing in Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter raises issues concerning information and knowledge sharing in organizations and why such sharing is often difficult to achieve. In particular, it compares an organizational cultural analysis with an organizational political one. The authors believe that the issues raised are not only important but are often insufficiently attended to by practitioners who are attempting to build technological information and knowledge management systems. The driver for the chapter is the fact that despite impressive advances in technology, and its now almost ubiquitous presence in organizations, many of the benefits originally expected concerning improved information and knowledge sharing have not materialised as was once confidently expected. One of the authors argues a basic reason for this lies in the lack of attention to the cultural foundations of organizations, while the other contends it is more because matters relating to organizational power and political matters are often misunderstood, overlooked or ignored. These different perspectives are discussed and contrasted in order to tease out the important differences between them and assess the prospects for a synthesis. It is concluded that, while there are important commonalities between the two perspectives, there are also fundamental differences, including concerning what are causes and what are effects and, therefore, how to go about effecting change regarding information and knowledge sharing.
INTRODUCTION

New organizational forms that are horizontally structured rather than functionally or vertically structured have been referred to, variously, as: modular, cluster, learning, network-centric, perpetual matrix organisations, spinout or virtual corporations (Miles & Snow, 1986; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Senge, 1990; Quinn, 1992). Regardless of the name, the defining characteristics of these new organizational forms are purported to be flatter hierarchies; decentralised decision-making; greater capacity for tolerance of ambiguity; permeable internal and external boundaries; capacity for renewal; self-organizing units, and self-integrating coordination mechanisms (Daft & Lewin, 1993; Warne et al., 2004). In such organizations, information and particularly knowledge is acknowledged to be the most strategically important resource, and organizational capabilities are viewed to be based on distinctive competencies in sharing and integrating this information and knowledge. The question then is why do so many efforts and systems that are targeted at enabling such sharing to take place fail as often as they do? If communication and sharing of information and knowledge are the keys to strategic organizational capabilities and there is little doubt that the technological capability exists to do it, then why is it rarely achieved, at least to the extent many think is worthwhile or even essential, (although see Hislop (2002) for a sceptical view regarding knowledge sharing via information technology)?

Knowledge management (KM), like information systems (IS) is derived from, and dependent on, a number of reference disciplines. The richness of both these newer disciplines could be said to be due, at least partially, to the multiple perspectives of the numerous branches of learning that are applied to the study of the effective use of information and knowledge in organizations. In information systems and knowledge management, many heated discussions have taken place as researchers and practitioners argue their perspectives on everything from basic definitions to the intricacies of IS and KM systems. This is not necessarily a bad situation because often new understandings and innovative solutions are derived from wide-ranging but constructive argument and discussion. This chapter is intended to fit this mould—a wide-ranging but constructive argument, discussion and comparison of different views. More specifically, what the authors aim to achieve in this chapter is to first outline and compare an organizational culture perspective on information and knowledge sharing with an organizational political perspective (as represented by the views of the two authors). By doing so, the intention is to tease out the important differences between them, identify any irreconcilable aspects and assess the potential for a synthesis. Note, however, that while the two perspectives discussed are labelled “organizational culture” and “organizational politics”, this is for brevity as well as convenience as two particular instances that may be fairly categorized thus, and are not intended as archetypes representative of all such views.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For more than three decades, researchers and practitioners have been concerned about the high failure rate of information systems and, more recently, knowledge management projects (e.g., Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1987; Ewusi-Mensah & Przasnyski, 1991; Sauer, 1993; Hart & Warne, 1997). As the industry has evolved, the search for factors influencing success and failure, however these are defined, has intensified. Although there may have been incremental improvements, this intensive activity seems not to have resulted in dramatic changes to the success rate for information systems and knowledge management projects. While definitions and rates of failures continue to be debated, information and the systems that