

Chapter 5.16

Impact of Chinese Culture Values on Knowledge Sharing through Online Communities of Practice

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how national (Chinese) cultural factors influence knowledge sharing behavior in virtual communities of practice at a large U.S.-based multinational organization. The data in this study come from interviews with the company's employees in China, and managers who are involved in managing knowledge-sharing initiatives. The study

results suggest that overall the influence of the national culture could be less pronounced in online knowledge sharing than what the literature has suggested. Although Chinese employees' tendency to draw sharp distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, as well as the modesty requirements were barriers to knowledge sharing online, the issue of saving face was less important than expected, and attention paid to power and hierarchy seemed to be less critical than what the

literature indicated. A surprising finding was that in the initially assumed collectivistic Chinese culture, the high degree of competitiveness among employees and job security concerns seem to override the collectivistic tendencies and are the main reasons for knowledge hoarding. The reasons for unexpected findings could be associated with differences between face-to-face and online knowledge sharing environments, the influence of the company's organizational culture, and the recent rapid changes of the overall Chinese cultural patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Research on organizational learning and knowledge creation shows that knowledge sharing, communication, and learning in organizations are profoundly influenced by cultural values of individual employees (Hambrick, Davison, Snell & Snow, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; Hutchings & Michailova, 2004; Jennex, 2005, 2006; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Studies of cognitive strategies and methods of learning and knowledge generation suggest that cognitive styles differ by national cultures (Korac-Kakabadze & Kouzmin, 1999). Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, and Triandis (2002) have explained how national cultural tendencies, for example, toward individualism and collectivism, strongly influence ways of thinking, including processing, interpreting, and using information and knowledge. People in collectivistic cultures are less likely than those in individualistic cultures to emphasize the significance of information that is written and codified, and more likely to disregard such information. Other dimensions of national culture, such as uncertainty avoidance, and power distance, also influence knowledge flows between individuals (Ford & Chan, 2003; Hofstede, 2001). There have been studies on the impact of national culture on knowledge sharing in general (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston & Triandis, 2002; Ford & Chan, 2003; Glisband & Holden,

2003; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Hutchings & Michailova, 2004). However, research on knowledge sharing through computer-mediated communication (CMC) in organizational settings, such as knowledge sharing through online communities of practice (CoPs), is scarce. At the same time, there are multiple examples of successful use of online CoPs by well-known industry leaders such as Hewlett Packard, British Petroleum, Chevron, Ford, IBM, and Shell (Ardichvili, Page & Wentling, 2003). Although there are some studies about online knowledge sharing (Bansler & Havn, 2003; Ardichvili et al., 2003), very few of these studies have addressed the role that national culture plays in knowledge sharing through CMC (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling & Stuedemann, 2006).

Therefore, there is a gap in current research on how national culture impacts knowledge sharing through CMC. To address this gap, this study focuses on knowledge sharing through online CoPs in Corporation Alpha's China offices (to maintain confidentiality, we will be using this pseudo-name for the Fortune 100 multinational company we have studied), and attempts to answer the following research question: How do Chinese cultural values affect the knowledge sharing behavior of Chinese employees in Alpha's China offices?

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

This section will present key ideas/literature related to the theoretical discourse applied in this article in the following areas: CoPs, knowledge sharing, and national (Chinese) cultural values.

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

Lave and Wenger (1991) established the notion of "community of practice" in their book on situated learning as a process of "legitimate peripheral participation." Wenger and Snyder (2000) defined communities of practice as groups of people in-

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