

Chapter III

The Impact of Group Relationships on Knowledge Sharing: A Cross-Cultural Study

Qiping Zhang

Long Island University, USA

Vincent M. Ribiere

New York Institute of Technology, USA

Thippaya Chintakovid

Drexel University, USA

ABSTRACT

Organizations nowadays typically have several locations geographically dispersed around the world. Organizations distribute their resources around the world to reduce cost and remain competitive. As a consequence, globally distributed working teams are common, thereby rendering a need for knowledge sharing cross-culturally. This chapter presents a series of studies investigating the impact of cultures on how people handle knowledge management issues. It shows how in-group/out-group relationships determine people's attitudes towards knowledge sharing in a global working environment. Findings of this project would help organizations' executives understand better how to encourage their members to reap benefits from using the knowledge management systems.

INTRODUCTION

Previous research exhibits that a knowledge management system solely is not the answer for successful knowledge management in an organization (Damodaran & Olphert, 2000; Thomas, Kellogg, & Erickson, 2001). Rather, social factors are an essential part in influencing how the knowledge management system would be utilized

(Damodaran & Olphert, 2000). Specifically, social factors influence knowledge management practices, among which knowledge sharing plays an important role.

Many factors influence people's attitudes towards knowledge sharing. First, organizational culture, particularly the reward policy, is an obvious factor. If the group outcome is encouraged, the knowledge sharing within the group will be

encouraged as well. Certainly, people will not share their unique knowledge with everyone in the organization. Studies show that people tend to share their knowledge only with their in-group members (Chow, Deng, & Ho, 2000). However, it is not clear what factors determine the boundary of in-group/out-group relationships in an organization. Second, at the individual level, personal values like altruism, power, and risk tolerance also play an important role in knowledge sharing. Individuals' value systems are deeply rooted in their national cultures. People, in general, would be aware of their cultural values, which are different from others, when they encounter a different culture.

In the rest of the chapter, we will first review the literature on influences of culture and in-group/out-group relationships on knowledge sharing. Then we will report two cross-cultural studies on knowledge sharing. We will conclude the chapter with a discussion on future directions in knowledge sharing in a global virtual environment.

Influences of Cultures on Knowledge Sharing

Culture, a set of values governing the way people think and behave, is one of the significant social factors influencing people's attitudes towards knowledge sharing.

Figure 1 shows the influences of cultures in a global corporate. For each global corporate, the influences of cultures come from multiple layers: national culture, corporate culture, and corporate sub-cultures. Cultures can be categorized as weak or strong (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). A strong culture will highly influence its sub-cultures (making them almost uniform), whereas a weak culture will have a low impact on its sub-cultures and disparities will appear in terms of behaviors and values between various groups in the organization. In this project, we focus on the outer layer—national culture. We

Figure 1. Influences of cultures on knowledge sharing in a global corporate



previously conducted research on the role of trust at the corporate culture level (Ribiere, 2005), and in the future we would continue our studies on the other layers and their interactions.

The most influential work on national cultural dimensions is by Hofstede (1980, 2001), who conducted a work value survey in a large multinational business organization (IBM) in 72 countries. Based on the data from IBM surveys and other subsequent IBM-unrelated value surveys, five cultural dimensions were identified: power distance (PDI), individualism/collectivism (IND), masculinity/femininity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO). These cultural dimensions have become an established framework for later cross-cultural research.

Figure 2 shows the cultural value indexes of the United States, Bahrain, and China based on the data we collected in this project. The United States and China differ dramatically on power distance and individualism/collectivism, and have been frequently used as a representative of western culture and eastern culture in cross-cultural studies. A strategic position between the East and the West makes the Kingdom of Bahrain a good

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