Chapter 8

An International Comparative Study of the Roles, Rules, Norms, and Values that Predict Email Use

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ABSTRACT

This chapter 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.

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 socio-economic 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 (Peterson & Wood, 2008). 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; Peterson & Smith, 2008). This line of research draws upon an earlier literature (Tannenbaum et al., 1974; Weber, 1947; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961) suggesting that societies differ in typical role relationships (for a broader discussion of these three types of cross-cultural research, refer to Peterson & Soendergaard, in press). Specifically, the social structures we consider include the self, role senders such as superiors, subordinates, coworkers, 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.,

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