Knowledge Sharing Across Culture—Critical Review

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Abstract. Knowledge and culture are indissolubly linked together in organizations. Considerable evidence supports the importance of culture in the success or failure of knowledge management. Then, the effectiveness of knowledge sharing needs both cultural understanding and new considerations in the knowledge transfer of intercultural organizations. This paper reviews some critical literatures and identifies the influence of different dimensions of culture on knowledge transfer and sharing in different types of knowledge. The aim of this paper is to propose a theoretical framework for knowledge sharing processes based on differences in national culture for future research.

1 Introduction

Knowledge and culture are indissolubly linked together in organizations. Recent technological revolution, accompanied by rapid globalization, has led to increased cultural heterogeneity within organizations. National borders no longer preclude individuals of different cultures from working in international organizations. The differences in the cultural orientation of the collaborating organizations increase the risk of misunderstandings and conflicts, and often lead to failure, but if managed in a balanced manner may also improve performance [1]. To overcome these barriers to success, we need both cultural understanding and new considerations in the knowledge transfer of intercultural organizations.

It is clear that knowledge does not flow without restrictions across cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries in organizations. Hence, the diversity and dispersion that is essentially a potential benefit for organizations is also an important barrier for knowledge sharing. This creates a central paradox for managers to deal with. To understand this better, there is a need for more insight into the social and cultural factors influencing knowledge sharing behavior in organizations.

Therefore, based on review of critical literatures, the author first summarizes current views of the definitions of knowledge to six perspectives and classifies views of knowledge to three types and three dimensions. Afterwards, the author tries to integrate cultural dimensions and knowledge management dimensions and to explore the characteristics of knowledge under different national culture backgrounds, then to diagnose cultural barriers to cross-cultural knowledge transfer and sharing.
2 Knowledge and knowledge taxonomy

The complex nature of knowledge has been discussed extensively in numerous literatures. In these literatures, the nature of knowledge has been viewed from six perspectives. The first view of knowledge is to distinguish it from data and information [2, 3]. Data can be classified as raw numbers, images, words, and sounds derived from observation or measurement. Information represents data arranged in a meaningful pattern. Knowledge is about beliefs, commitment, perspectives, intention and action [2]. Then knowledge is defined as a justified belief that increases an entity's capacity for effective action [2, 4].

The second perspective takes knowledge as a state of mind. Reference [5] described knowledge as "a state or fact of knowing" with knowing being a condition of "understanding gained through experience or study; the sum or range of what has been perceived, discovered, or learned". The third view defines knowledge as an object [6-8]. This perspective assumes that knowledge can be viewed as a thing to be stored and manipulated (i.e., an object). The forth perspective is that knowledge can be viewed as a process of simultaneously knowing and acting [6-8]. The fifth perspective on knowledge is that of a condition of access to information [7]. According to this view, knowledge must be organized to facilitate access to and retrieval of content. Finally, the capability perspective knowledge focuses on the potential for influencing future action. Reference [6, 9] build upon the capability view by suggesting that knowledge is not so much a capability for specific action.

A further key issue of knowledge sharing research concerns the relationship and interaction among different types of knowledge. Reference [10] note that there are at least three distinct types of knowledge: human knowledge, social knowledge, and structured knowledge. Human knowledge constitutes what individuals know or know how to do, is manifested in important skills, and usually comprises both explicit and tacit knowledge. Social knowledge exists in relationships among individuals or within groups. Social or collective knowledge is largely tacit, composed of cultural norms that exist as a result of working together. Structured knowledge is embedded in organizational systems, processes, rules, and routines. This kind of knowledge is explicit and rule based and can exist independently of the knower [11].

These three types of knowledge work in concert with terms of the three dimensions of knowledge, proposed by [12]: simple versus complex, explicit versus tacit, and independent versus systemic. The first dimension is relevant in cross-border knowledge transactions. Complex knowledge evokes more causal uncertainties and transfers such types of knowledge required amount of factual information. Simple knowledge can be captured with little information and is, therefore, relatively easy to transfer. The second dimension concerns how well articulated or implicit the knowledge is. The transfer of tacit knowledge requires richer context and richer media, because tacit knowledge requires more than just codification. Explicit knowledge, however, can be codified and is transferred with relative ease. The third dimension of knowledge deals with the independent versus systemic character of knowledge—that is, the extent to which the knowledge is embedded in the organizational context. Knowledge that is independent can be described by itself, whereas knowledge that is systemic must be described in relation to a body of knowledge existing in the transferring organization.

Using these dimensions, human knowledge can be conceptualized as either simple or complex, as tacit or explicit (or both), and, generally, as more independent or systemic. Social knowledge can be either simple or complex and is largely tacit and systemic in character. Structured knowledge is either simple or complex, is usually more explicit than tacit, and is largely systemic in character. "Sticky" knowledge [13], which is more complex, tacit, and systemic, is more difficult to transfer and sharing, regardless of cultural
differences. Some combinations of human, social, and structured knowledge can take on the character of sticky knowledge and become even more difficult to transfer and share, regardless of the cultural differences involved between the transacting organizations.

Cross-border transfer and share organizational knowledge is most effective when the type of knowledge (i.e., human, social, or structured) being transferred is simple, explicit, and independent and when such transfers involve similar cultural contexts. In contrast, transfer and share is least effective when the type of knowledge being transferred is complex, tacit, and systemic and involves dissimilar cultural contexts.

3 Culture and cultural patterns

It should be noted that there are strong interactions between cultural patterns and cognitive styles. In addition, some cultural contexts might foster some cognitive styles that are uniquely responsible for the evolution and practice of certain types of organizational knowledge, compared to other cultural contexts, which might emphasize different styles.

Researchers suggest different manifestation of culture. Reference [10] notes that values, norms, and practices are reflections of culture, while [14] categorizes culture into values and practices subsuming symbols, heroes, and rituals. Culture also refers to a learned and socially transmitted set of behavioral standards. It is held, expressed, and shared by individuals through their personal values, norms, activities, attitudes, cognitive processes, interpretation of symbols, feelings, ideas, reactions and morals [15-17]. Culture is learned most intensively in the early years of one's life and has an enduring impact throughout life [18]. Culture can be defined as a learned set of norms for beliefs and social behavior that are shared by members of a group and which governs their behavior [19].

No matter how researchers define culture, however, there is a common view that culture has at least two layers: the outer layer and the core. The core of culture is value, which is described as a fairly stable emotional tendency to respond consistently to some specific object, situation, person or category of people [20]. It's an invisible, unconscious, and embedded basic feeling that is manifested in the outer visible layer of culture, such as attitudes and practices, and in alternatives of behaviors [10, 21]. The key role of culture in organizations is creating a consensually validated system of beliefs and values which influences organizational behavior [22].

Culture can be applied to different dimensions, such as nations, organizations, religious groups, and so on. National culture (external culture) and organizational culture (internal culture) are widely accepted as important cultural dimensions for organizations. National culture is believed to play significant roles in determining the efficacy of knowledge transfer and sharing within the same organization that cross different national borders and cultures [23].

Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions represents a genuine milestone in the field of cultural impact. His findings [15,16,24] have become the quintessential representation of how national cultures influence business issues. Reference [15] originally identified the key cultural characteristics which appear to distinguish among cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity.

Then based on a study of the values of students in 23 countries, the fifth dimension of national cultures was added. It was labeled first as Confucian Dynamism [25] and later labeled as Long-term versus Short-term Orientation [26]. Whereafter, the sixth dimension called Indulgence versus Restraint was added [27].
4 Cultural barriers in knowledge sharing

Knowledge production and sharing processes are influenced by the cultural dimensions and organizational culture. Organizational culture can act as a mediator for national culture and knowledge management processes [28]. In the process of knowledge transfer, aspects such as, trust, common cultures, vocabularies, frames of reference, meeting times and places, broad ideas of productive work, status and rewards that do not go to knowledge owners, absorptive capacity in recipients, the belief that knowledge is not the prerogative of particular groups, absence of the ‘not-invented-here’ syndrome, and tolerance for mistakes or need for help, among others, are key to the organizational culture [29]. Only by combining them the company will develop a good environment of knowledge production and sharing between the employee and managers [24, 30].

To be effective in producing and sharing knowledge, the organization must identify and overcome some cultural barriers that the literature divides into two levels: Barriers at the macro level that acts upon cultural dimensions of Hofstede [30]; and barriers at the micro level which has to do with the organizational culture as it is shaped by national culture of citizens working for the organization.

The managers play an important role in creating the environment in the organization for the employee and the director of each department to develop a culture of good knowledge production and sharing and, for the organization to create innovative of products and processes. Thus, they need to encourage their employee to share knowledge with others. The conceptual framework combines the necessary elements of the organization to start or stop the process of knowledge production and sharing being the managers the key element in overcoming cultural barriers in the organization.

5 Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This paper proposes two abstract conclusions: (1) The effectiveness of knowledge sharing is directly related to the type of knowledge involved in the transfer process. (2) In addition, the sharing of knowledge is moderated by the nature of transacting cultural patterns and the cognitive styles of the individuals.

The research is limited by its scope because it focuses only on knowledge sharing processes. Further research might examine the culture factor influencing knowledge management in other knowledge management processes. There is also an unclear detailed relationship between knowledge management performance and knowledge management decision based on different culture dimensions. Further research might examine the relationship between organization performance and knowledge management decision based on different culture dimensions, as well as empirical research on the cultural conditions that lead to appropriate and inappropriate adaptation.

References


15. G. Hofstede, Culture’s Consequences (Sage, Beverly Hills, 1980).


