

Chapter V

Cultural Impact on Global Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces how culture impacts global knowledge sharing. Effective knowledge sharing (KS), one of the four interdependent dimensions of knowledge management (KM), is particularly important in today's global environment in which national cultural differences are negotiated all the time. Knowledge sharing is described along six dimensions and national culture along four dimensions. A model is presented, which provides guidelines for effectively sharing different types of knowledge within different cultural environments. Several examples are presented to illustrate the model's effectiveness. Using the model as a guide, the authors believe that decision makers

will increase the chances that information and knowledge will be shared successfully.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communications technology—in particular, when it is used to gather and utilize knowledge—are key to the growth of today's dynamic and highly competitive world economy (OECD, 1996). Companies are under constant pressure to have the right knowledge at the right time in the hands of the right person in order to help increase productivity, be more innovative, and increase competitiveness. Whether a company is coordinating activities among its various manu-

facturing and sales operations around the world, managing far-flung outsourcing relationships, or engaging in other value chain activities with geographically dispersed companies, companies of the 21st century operate in environments with insatiable needs for collaborating, sharing, and organizing knowledge. As an indication of the magnitude of the situation, more than one-third of world trade is conducted by multinational companies.

Given how organizations today have an unprecedented ability for information coordination through IT developments in ERP systems, global communications, and the like, effective information resource management (IRM) is paramount. One IRM tenet is that organizations need to be able to share information in ways that improve both efficiency and effectiveness. Today, knowledge management (KM) provides a methodology for defining and measuring knowledge needs and implementing an appropriate technical solution. Within KM's typical processes, effective knowledge sharing is particularly important in order for the various business networks to be effective both within companies and between companies (Moller & Svahn, 2003). A company's competitiveness is influenced more and more by its ability to identify and apply its specialized knowledge resources (Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston, & Triandis, 2002). For example, innovations and new ideas often are born out of having the right people in touch with one another.

So, how does an organization create and manage effective KM systems? Moffett, McAdam, and Parkinson (2003) suggest that there has been an over-emphasis on technology issues. Nemati (2002) reaffirms that technology is just one of five major factors that influence knowledge management from a global management perspective: culture, firm strategy and structure, IT infrastructure, organizational/managerial, and industry specifics.

To date, there has been limited research on how cross-cultural issues relate to knowledge

management or to knowledge sharing (Ford & Chan, 2003). Therefore, this chapter will focus on cultural impacts and their role and impact on knowledge sharing; specifically, national culture issues, not organizational culture issues. The chapter will review the evolution of KM and knowledge sharing (KS), provide a background on national culture, and explore the impact of national culture on knowledge sharing. The chapter will end with a discussion of future trends in KM/KS and KM/KS research.

BACKGROUND: LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge management/knowledge sharing and national culture are areas of research in which each has a large body of work. This section begins with an overview of knowledge management and knowledge sharing and follows with a discussion of literature related to ethnic or national culture.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Knowledge management (KM) initiatives by companies seek to "achieve knowledge integration and benefit from the collective knowledge of the organization through learning" (Mason, 2003, p. 31). More specifically, KM "facilitates the creation, capturing, organization, accessing, and use of an enterprise's knowledge capital," consisting of human capital (e.g., knowledge and skills), structural capital (e.g., systems, processes, and methods), and relational capital (e.g., relationship with customers, suppliers, and external organizations) (Cloete & Snyman, 2003, p. 237). This section discusses what knowledge is, the components of KM, where knowledge sharing fits in, and the goals of knowledge management systems.

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