

Chapter X

Comparing Cultural and Political Perspectives of Data, Information, and Knowledge Sharing in Organisations

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ABSTRACT

This paper raises issues concerning data, information, and knowledge sharing in organisations and, in particular, compares an organisational cultural analysis of why such sharing is often difficult to achieve with an organisational political one. The issues raised are often insufficiently attended to by practitioners who are attempting to build technological information and knowledge management systems. The driver for the paper is that despite impressive advances in technology and its now almost ubiquitous presence in organisations, as well as academic study over several decades, many of the benefits originally expected concerning improved data, information, and knowledge sharing have not materialised as expected. Basic reasons for this lie in the lack of attention to the cultural foundations of organisations and because matters relating to organisational power and political matters are often misunderstood, overlooked, or ignored. These different perspectives are discussed and contrasted in order to tease out the important differences between them and assess the prospects for a synthesis. It is concluded that while there are important commonalities between the two perspectives there are also fundamental differences, notably regarding what are causes and what are effects and, therefore, how to go about effecting change regarding data, information, and knowledge sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Flatter organisational hierarchies, decentralised decision-making, and so on, enabled through appropriate use of information technologies for data, information, and knowledge sharing, have been proposed as the way for firms to gain a competitive advantage in today's dynamic and interdependent world, and it may even be that many people in such firms acknowledge this to be true. The question, then, is why do so many efforts and systems that are targeted at enabling such sharing and providing the capabilities it would permit fail as often as they do? If communication and sharing of data, information, and knowledge are the keys to strategic organisational capabilities, then why is it rarely achieved, at least to the extent many think is worthwhile or even essential, when there is little doubt that the technological capability exists to do it (but see Hislop [2002] for a sceptical view regarding knowledge sharing via information technology)?

Knowledge management (KM), like information systems (IS), is derived from, and dependent on, a number of reference disciplines. The richness of both areas could be said to be due, at least partially, to the multiple perspectives of the numerous branches of learning that are applied to the study of the effective use of data, information, and knowledge in organisations. In IS and KM, many heated discussions haven't taken place as researchers and practitioners argue their perspectives on everything from basic definitions to the intricacies of IS and KM systems. This is not necessarily a bad situation because often new understandings and innovative solutions are derived from wide-ranging but constructive argument and discussion. This paper is intended to fit this mold — to be a wide-ranging but constructive argument, discussion, and comparison of different views — and is the first of what the authors hope will be a continuing, as well as a useful, series of dialectic discussions on aspects of IS and KM that engage and elicit input from a

wider audience as well as encompassing debate about additional perspectives over and above those presented here. More specifically, what we aim to achieve in this paper is to first outline and compare an organisational culture perspective on data, information, and knowledge sharing with an organisational political one (as represented by the views of the two authors). By doing so, we wish to tease out the important differences between them, identify any irreconcilable aspects, and assess the potential for a synthesis. Note, however, that while we have labelled our two perspectives “organisational culture” and “organisational politics” for brevity as well as convenience, it should be recognised that they are two particular instances that may be fairly categorised thus and are not intended as archetypes representative of all such views.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

For more than three decades researchers and practitioners have been concerned about the high failure rate of information systems and, more recently, knowledge management projects (e.g., Ewusi-Mensah & Przasnyski, 1991; Hart & Warne, 1997; Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1987; Sauer, 1993). As the industry has evolved, the search for factors influencing success and failure has intensified, but, although there may have been incremental improvements, this intensive activity does not seem to have resulted in dramatic changes to the success rate for information systems and knowledge management projects. While definitions and rates of failure continue to be debated, information and the systems that provide it have become an increasingly integral part of modern business life and knowledge generation, and no organisation of any size can exist without them (Applegate, Austin, & McFarlan, 2003; Beynon-Davies, 2002). A variety of factors have been identified by researchers as relevant to, or as contributing causes of, the problems that have

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