

Chapter 8.12

Culture–Free or Culture–Bound?

A Boundary Spanning Perspective on Learning in Knowledge Management Systems

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management systems (KMSs) have been criticized as having a North American bias. The cultural dimension of KMSs, particularly the relationship of learning and culture in KM projects, are rarely discussed. This paper addresses these concerns in a review of the conceptual foundations for KM and by examining implementations of KM projects. Despite the evolutionary changes in how KM is viewed, KMSs, as they have been designed, implemented, and reported, do not appear to provide for cultural diversity among users. Instead, the reports of KMSs indicate that such systems seek to create and maintain a homogeneous organizational culture, and the adoption of such a shared culture appears to be a prerequisite for success. The paper discusses

KMSs as systems that exhibit boundary spanning objects and processes in three different categories, and an analysis of reported projects reveals that boundary spanning across national and ethnic boundaries is rare.

INTRODUCTION: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Global enterprises increasingly turn to knowledge management systems (KMSs) to raise productivity and remain competitive. Although there is considerable evidence that applications of information technology (IT) for storage and improved access of information help create value, some observers believe that KMSs are limited

in their utility because they have been designed with a North American bias (Nonaka, 1995). To understand why this bias may be of concern, it is useful to consider KM programs in the context of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Penrose, 1959).

The dynamic economic environment and the ever-increasing innovative capabilities of global organizations have renewed interest in the RBV. In the opinion of many writers, the RBV has had a significant impact on how information systems and strategy are viewed. The RBV is closely linked with strategy and sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1994, 1996), plays a major role in how the modern economic theory of the firm has developed (Madhok, 2002), and perhaps has become the most influential framework for the theory of strategic management and sustained competitive advantage (Barney et al., 2001). The knowledge-based view (KBV) of the firm, foreseen by Drucker (1988), is a special case of the RBV with a focus on knowledge as an organizational resource (Grant, 1996a, 1996b; Spender, 1996).

As in the more general case of the RBV's influence on strategic management and competitive advantage, the KBV provides the conceptual foundation for much of the research and design efforts that link information technology (IT) and systems, strategic IT, organizational learning, and knowledge management systems. The KBV has shaped the discussion of KMSs and the role of information technology in strategy and competitive advantage (Huber, 1991; Mata, 1995; Kogut, 1996; Alavi, 2001). While the KBV is the foundation for IT support of knowledge management, most observers agree that knowledge by itself is not the source of a competitive advantage. Instead, organizations use knowledge to gain a competitive advantage through learning (Stata, 1989), by the development of competencies (Rebentisch & Ferretti, 1995; Alavi, 2001), and through knowledge integration (Grant, 1996b; Kogut, 1996). In other words, the value of KM programs depends not

only on the application of IT but on the individual and organizational learning and knowledge integration that comes from revealing and using all the intellectual assets of the organization. This requires a mix of technology and organizational processes.

From the perspective of the KBV, a global enterprise that has members from distinct ethnic and cultural backgrounds would appear to have a potentially large asset in the rich source of tacit and experiential knowledge of its members. KM efforts would be one way to access this potential asset. This paper addresses the question of how and to what extent firms may be taking advantage of the knowledge asset represented by having members with diverse backgrounds.

In the remainder of the paper, we will use the terms "KM" and "KMS" interchangeably; both will refer to the set of activities directed toward knowledge asset management. Our approach is in the spirit of socio-technical systems, thus KM and KMS include physical resources (e.g., computers and communication infrastructures), conceptual resources (e.g., repositories of expressed knowledge, tacit knowledge), and the social and organizational processes associated with the use of these resources.

The paper contributes to the discussion of KM by drawing attention to the importance of culture in KM efforts and proposing that KMSs may be viewed as boundary spanning systems. The cultural boundary is important for two reasons. First, ethnic backgrounds and national cultures represent a potential knowledge asset of the enterprise. Second, culture is a significant factor in how people learn, and learning is required for the organization to take advantage of the potential intellectual assets in the organization. The paper uses Carlile's boundary spanning framework (Carlile, 2002) to review the functions of KMSs and to examine how these systems handle culture.

In the following three sections, this paper provides a synopsis of knowledge management approaches and learning from three perspectives:

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