

Chapter 2

The Impact of Culture on the Application of the SECI Model

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ABSTRACT

The concept of culture and its relationship with Nonaka's SECI model, a widely used model of organizational knowledge creation, is discussed in this chapter. Culture, in various forms, is argued to impact on the SECI model and the model itself is embedded in a certain context. This context determines the characteristics of the knowledge creation modes as described by SECI and therefore makes the model either more, or less, pertinent in a given context. This is regardless of whether that context is primarily determined by national culture, organizational culture or other factors. Differences in emphases in a given contextual environment on either tacit or explicit knowledge also impacts on knowledge creation as defined by SECI. Finally, it is emphasized that being conscious of the cultural situatedness of the SECI model can lead to a more adequate use of the model for organizational knowledge creation.

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to explore how the SECI model is influenced by, and relates to, the concept of culture at various levels. Cultural phenomena such as value orientations, and national, organizational, and other levels of culture arguably have an impact on the SECI model. Our main premise is that the SECI model – as other models

and theories – was conceived in a particular cultural and value context. Thus, context shapes the model and determines how it can be applied in a different context, e.g. in a different culture, in a different organization or in a different department or team.

Knowledge and the ability to create new knowledge, share it and use it in organizational processes and routines is of paramount importance in order for organizations to survive in an increasingly competitive global marketplace (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). In addition to sharing and applying existing

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knowledge, one of the key activities companies have to engage in is the creation of new knowledge through organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978, 1996). Senge (2006) also emphasized the importance for organizations to engage constantly in learning.

Organizational knowledge creation has often been described using the SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization), first developed by Nonaka in 1991, and expanded and adapted further by, for example, Nonaka (1994), Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995), von Krogh, Ichijo & Nonaka (2000), and Takeuchi & Nonaka (2004). It is suggested here that it is worthwhile investigating this model from the point of view of culture in order to try to understand the model better and to make it more applicable and relevant across a wide variety of contexts. Furthermore, it is important to note that research into knowledge management has mostly been conducted in the Western world, particularly the USA, and therefore has a Western cultural bias to it (Pauleen, 2007). Applying a model which stems from a non-Western context can help to gain a fresh and different perspective on knowledge creation.

In order to discuss the cultural situatedness of the SECI model, we will start by addressing problems of defining the concepts of culture and values. Culture should not only be thought of as being primarily national, but one should also take other levels of culture into account as well. Then, the dichotomy of tacit and explicit knowledge, which is a central element of the SECI model, will be discussed and the SECI model itself described. It will be suggested that knowledge management itself and its tools and methods are determined and shaped by culture and a given situational context. The universal applicability of the SECI model and the impact of culture and context on knowledge creation and the SECI model and its applications in a business setting will be discussed. Focusing on three main levels of culture, rather than giving an exhaustive account of the many potential aspects of culture, we will explore a)

the national level using two of Hofstede's (1980, 1994) dimensions, b) organizational culture using two management practices of KEYS, a tool for assessing the climate for creativity in an organization (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby & Herron, 1996), and c) the individual-level values using two values of the Schwartz Value Survey (Schwartz, 1992, 1994). By way of example, we illustrate a range of potential impacts these three levels of culture can have on applying the SECI model in a business context. Finally, conclusions and suggestions for further research are given.

CULTURE AND VALUES

This section introduces the concept of culture, highlighting the importance of taking into account several levels of culture and provides a deliberately broad definition of culture for the purposes of this chapter. The concept of values will briefly be discussed since it is closely related to culture.

Arguably, culture determines behaviour in all areas of life. Behaviour does not take place in a vacuum, but is contextualized and situated in the concrete life-world of individuals (Lave & Wenger, 1991). There is a considerable number of cultural aspects that have been identified as influencing knowledge management (e.g. Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling & Stuedemann, 2006; Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston & Triandis, 2002; Carr-Chellman, 2005; Michailova & Hutchings, 2006; Yamazaki, 2005). All of these define culture as national culture. However, it is suggested here that *national* culture only accounts for some variations in behaviour across people, and that a more individualized and contextualized notion of culture is desirable. For example, Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) distinguish between six levels of culture: national, regional/ethnic/religious/linguistic, gender, generation, social class and organizational or corporate. We suggest that all of these, depending on the situation and context, have

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