

Chapter 16

Zooming in on the Effect of National Culture on Knowledge Sharing Behavior

Wei Li
Freddie Mac, USA

ABSTRACT

This research project investigates what are the national cultural factors that influence employees' cross-cultural knowledge sharing in online environments and in what way. The chapter draws on findings from 41 in-depth interviewees conducted with 20 Chinese and 21 American employees who worked for a large multinational corporation. The rich interview data identified three national cultural differences that impacted Chinese and American participants' knowledge sharing through an online system, namely, language, differences grounded in collectivism/individualism, and different levels of uncertainty avoidance. English created a barrier for Chinese users to post their ideas but it didn't seem to stop them from consuming knowledge. Differences grounded in collectivist/individualist values were mainly reflected in these two cultural groups' different logic regarding the relationship between different working contexts and the need to share. Chinese participants also showed a higher level of uncertainty avoidance than American participants. Together these cultural differences could explain why Chinese shared knowledge less frequently than their American peers. Despite these reported cultural differences, findings from this research suggest that the actual cultural differences were smaller than what literature implies. Possible explanations for fewer cultural differences are explored. Practical implications for knowledge management practitioners are also offered.

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of business over the past two decades has raised awareness of the importance of *knowledge sharing* within subsidiaries located in

different countries with differing cultures (Chase, 2004; Gammelgaard & Ritter, 2008; Li, 2010). In his dissertation, Buzan (2005) argued that in the era of increased globalization, the knowledge multinational organizations need in order to keep their competitive advantages is no longer located in

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one central place, usually the headquarters; instead it is dispersed in headquarters and subsidiaries. According to Buzan, the model of knowledge flow from the headquarters to subsidiaries is outdated and should be replaced by the model where subsidiaries also play an important role in the process of knowledge creation and diffusion (pp. 52-53).

In order to leverage the knowledge of employees who are distributed all over the world, multinational organizations, such as Buckman Laboratories and Siemens, have been implementing distributed knowledge sharing systems to help their members access knowledge regardless of space or time (Fulmer, 1999; Heier, Borgman & Manuth, 2005; Stonehouse & Minocha, 2008). In order to encourage employees from different countries to use knowledge sharing systems more effectively and make the systems more fruitful in a global setting, we need to know what factors, particularly what cultural factors influence employees' online knowledge sharing in *cross-cultural* contexts; however, despite the growing importance of cross-cultural considerations in knowledge sharing, the literature is almost silent in its cross-cultural dimensions (Ang & Massingham, 2007; Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston & Triandis, 2002; Glisby & Holden, 2003; Holden, 2001, 2002; Nissen, 2007). Not many studies have explicitly concentrated on the discussion of national cultural factors that influence knowledge sharing (Dulaimi, 2007; Huang, 2005; Jennex, 2006; Kohlbacher & Krähe, 2007; Lai & Lee, 2007; Paik & Choi, 2005; Sackmann & Friesl, 2007; Zhu, 2004), let alone empirical research dedicated to the influence of national cultural differences on virtual knowledge sharing. In order to address this research gap, The author carried out a qualitative study in a multinational corporation and attempt to answer the following research questions:

- What are the cultural differences that influence online knowledge sharing among Chinese and American employees?
- How do cultural differences affect the way Chinese and American employees share knowledge online?

It needs to be pointed out that “knowledge sharing” is defined in this study as the activity in which participants are involved in the joint process of contributing, negotiating and utilizing knowledge. Knowledge sharing is a joint process in nature because participants need to be engaged in the process if they really want to share knowledge. The form of engagement can be contributing their ideas, or negotiating the meaning of knowledge, or absorbing and making sense of others' ideas in order to use them for future tasks; therefore, by this definition both asking questions to seek knowledge and answering questions to provide knowledge are knowledge sharing activities. Other researchers have also argued that knowledge sharing is a two-way process with both knowledge providers and knowledge consumers involved (Barachini, 2009; Hendriks, 1999; Hooff & Ridder, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will review the existing studies that shed light on national cultural impact on knowledge sharing. It begins with reviewing the theoretical perspectives regarding the influence of national cultural values on knowledge sharing, and then reports the empirical studies exploring knowledge sharing in cross-cultural contexts. Hofstede (2001) defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 9). According to Hofstede, culture manifests itself in different ways including values, norms, symbols and artifacts, but the core element of culture is its value system; culture is a very complex phenomenon and it can present itself at different levels; at the highest level is the

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