



POSITION PAPER

'Think of others' in knowledge management: making culture work for you

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Abstract

Knowledge management has an important role to play in both organizational and national cultures. In order to have a paradigm shift from a knowledge hoarding to a more knowledge-sharing culture, knowledge management should be used as part of the human capital strategy for the organization. The impact of culture on knowledge management has been studied widely, but little has been written on how knowledge management can affect organizational culture. This paper provides a thought-piece on addressing this overlooked area.

Knowledge Management Research & Practice (2008) 6, 47–51.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.kmrp.8500162

Keywords: organizational culture; knowledge management; knowledge sharing; national culture

Introduction

Much has been written in looking at how culture influences knowledge-sharing or knowledge management (KM) practices. Recently, for example, Lichtenstein & Brain (2006) looked at an Australian education service provider and found that a knowledge-sharing culture cannot be considered in isolation from culture, organizational strategy, and organizational structure. Li *et al.* (2006) examine Chinese manufacturing companies and show that organizational culture and KM are highly correlated, as well as having an impact on organizational performance. Lee (2006) studied 42 organizations in Korea and found that a knowledge-friendly organizational climate is linked to higher KM performance. Ardichvili *et al.* (2006) examined the impact of national culture factors on knowledge-sharing strategies in virtual communities of practice in China, Russia, and Brazil. They found that the values and cultural preferences of employees greatly affect the success of a KM system in a particular country or region. Awazu (2004) has examined the role of informal network players in terms of applying distributed KM in global contexts.

Certainly, KM has been studied in terms of both organizational culture and societal/national culture. Roman-Velazquez (2004), for example, performed his dissertation research to examine how organizational culture in the U.S. government and not-for-profits affects KM success. He found that KM success depended on the right match between organizational and work unit culture and the codification or personalization of KM approach applied. The effects of culture on KM have been studied fairly widely; however, the converse has not been analyzed as closely. That is, what are the effects of KM systems on changing the culture of an organization?

Schein (1992) is one of the key thinkers to look at organizational culture in terms of a three-layer cake. The top layer is the set of visible artifacts. The middle layer is the espoused values, and the bottom layer is the

underlying beliefs. Hofstede (2001) has looked at cultural dimensions and has taken a more societal viewpoint in comparing organizations across cultures. More recently, Ishida (2006) discusses 'glocalization' whereby people with various cultural backgrounds can preserve other regions' indigenous cultural traditions, such as sumo wrestling. Can glocalization exist for KM?

In terms of KM's impact on organizational culture, two general schools of thought exist. The first school feels that the organizational culture must change first before introducing KM. That is, a knowledge-sharing culture should be a pre-requisite before KM systems can be successful in the organization. The other school of thought is to first introduce KM systems that fit the organization's culture, and then individualized transformation will amass to organizational transformation. Since it can take many years to change a macro-culture into an organizational setting, it may be best to consider the latter approach in introducing a KM application that is in alignment with the existing organizational culture. In this manner, buy-in may be somewhat easier as opposed to introducing a system or approach that runs counter to the organizational culture.

Let's look at our original question on how KM can inform an organizational culture.

Using KM to inform organizational culture

Many organizations embark on their KM journey for five key reasons, as shown in Table 1.

One hope of KM is to create a knowledge-sharing environment in order to build a stronger sense of belonging among the organization's employees. By increasing a sense of community, more interactions might lead to increased collaboration and innovation. Density in the organization will also increase, as employees will be connected to more employees in the organization (Liebowitz, 2007). This should ultimately lead to building and nurturing a knowledge-sharing culture – hopefully, one that accentuates knowledge sharing vs knowledge hoarding.

What types of KM applications can facilitate this possible knowledge-sharing culture change? Online communities of practice have been applied over the years to extend the reach and knowledge of individuals in the organization internally or externally. Blogs and wikis also serve a similar purpose. Expertise locator systems provide yellow pages of expertise to facilitate making people-to-people connections, for example, in terms of locating individuals for project teams or looking for key sources of knowledge in particular areas. Social networking sites, such as LinkedIn.com, thefacebook.com, or myspace.com also allow people to expand their connections with others. Lessons learned systems allow the sharing of best practices so that people can learn from each other, whether successes or failures. Enterprise content management systems and portals serve as knowledge repositories and gateways to tap into explicit knowledge that has been codified. Knowledge-sharing forums, knowledge

Table 1 Key factors why organizations embark on KM initiatives

Adaptability/agility:

- Anticipate potential market opportunities for new products/services
- Rapidly commercialize new innovations
- Adapt quickly to unanticipated changes
- Anticipate surprises and crises
- Quickly adapt the organization's goals and objectives to industry/market changes
- Decrease market response times
- Be responsive to new market demands
- Learn, decide, and adapt faster than the competition

Creativity:

- Innovate new products/services
- Identify new business opportunities
- Learn not to reinvent the wheel
- Quickly access and build on experience and ideas to fuel innovation

Institutional memory building:

- Attract and retain employees
- Retain expertise of personnel
- Capture and share best practices

Organizational internal effectiveness:

- Coordinate the development efforts of different units
- Increase the sense of belonging and community among employees in the organization
- Avoid overlapping development of corporate initiatives
- Streamline the organization's internal processes
- Reduce redundancy of information and knowledge
- Improve profits, grow revenues
- Shorten product development cycles
- Provide training, corporate learning
- Accelerate the transfer and use of existing know-how
- Improve communication and coordination across company units (i.e., reduce stove piping)

Organizational external effectiveness:

- Reach to new information about the industry and market
- Increase customer satisfaction
- Support e-business initiatives
- Manage customer relationships
- Deliver competitive intelligence
- Enhance supply chain management
- Improve strategic alliances

fairs, mentoring, job shadowing, cross-functional teaming, and other KM-related approaches can also be used to facilitate the sharing of knowledge across the organization.

What are the types of behavior that we might want to influence from an organizational culture perspective through KM? Certainly, as previously highlighted, the 'sharing knowledge is power' mantra should be espoused vs the 'knowledge is power' culture. Sharing knowledge leads to collaboration and hopefully innovation.

Another key behavior that organizations should foster is the ability to think critically. Browne & Keeley (2001) discuss 11 questions that should be asked to think in a critical way. They are:

1. What is the issue and conclusion?
2. What are the reasons?
3. Which words or phrases are ambiguous?
4. What are the value conflicts and assumptions?
5. What are the descriptive assumptions?
6. Are there any fallacies in the reasoning?
7. How good is the evidence?
8. Are there rival causes?
9. Are the statistics deceptive?
10. What significant information is omitted?
11. What reasonable conclusions are possible?

Can KM enhance critical thinking? Improved information and knowledge should make the decision maker better informed in order to challenge assumptions, explore holes in the logic, and substantiate the evidence. Being able to think critically should be an organizational value, which all employees should possess. Applying ‘strategic intelligence’ (Liebowitz, 2006a, b) in improving organizational strategic decision making should be an outcome of the critical thinking process.

Communicating effectively, especially as related to cross-cultural communications, should also be an important factor in the fabric of the organizational culture. Liebowitz *et al.* (2006) echo most employers’ views in stressing the importance of speaking and writing well, especially for information technology professionals. Kramer (2001) also indicates the need for understanding intercultural contexts. Time, space, uncertainty, gender, and touch are various dimensions that vary according to various societal cultures. For example, a firm handshake in the United States may connote self-assurance and confidence, whereas a strong handshake in the Pacific Rim may signify aggression. Kramer (2001) emphasizes being mindful of intercultural beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviors, and norms in terms of successful oral and written communications abroad and at home. KM may be able to enhance one’s cross-cultural communications skills by learning from others through lessons learned systems, online communities, or enterprise content management systems containing checklists of ‘Dos and Taboos’ in communicating with others abroad.

Team building and project management are related behaviors that should be important parts of forming an organizational culture. Certainly, knowledge-sharing forums with experienced project managers using storytelling to interact with up-and-coming project leaders for conveying their ‘war stories’ could help improve project management abilities. NASA’s Academy of Program/Project Engineering Leadership (<http://appel.nasa.gov>) uses these knowledge-sharing forums, along with master forums, knowledge transfer workshops, and mentoring programs, to improve NASA program and

project management capabilities. Through online communities and expertise locator systems, team building can also be enhanced to form closer bonds.

The last, perhaps most important, behavior that should be emulated as part of an organizational culture is the employee’s strong commitment to the mission, core values, shared beliefs, and vision of the organization. Employees should just not be able to memorize the core values, but should live them. As Collins (2001) points out, the most important to great, enduring organizations is its core values. KM can help reinforce these core values and strategic goals in a number of ways. For example, the KM strategy for the organization must be aligned with the organizational strategic goals. If misalignment occurs, then KM will not be effective and runs the risk of failing. By having proper alignment, behaviors will be reinforced in order to best reflect the goals and values of the organization.

Pushing the envelope

When looking at organizational cultures and trans-border knowledge flows, what are the emerging areas that warrant future investigation in terms of how KM can help? One ripe area involves applying more rigor in better analyzing knowledge flows and gaps in organizations from domestic and multinational perspectives. For example, if one multinational company acquires another one, how can KM be applied to see if this new entity is operating at full throttle? Social network analysis, as an emerging technique used in knowledge audits and the KM field, has been applied to see if the executives and senior managers are collaborating well after a multinational merger. Social network analysis (<http://www.insna.org>; <http://www.networkroundtable.org>) is one technique that should continue to be utilized in the KM field to better understand how knowledge flows within organizations, and also to identify structural holes in the organization where key knowledge is not flowing through that entity (Liebowitz, 2007).

Business protocol overseas will continue to be important as companies expand in China, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and other areas. Learning the proper business protocol for conducting negotiations, speaking conversationally, running meetings, punctuality, and related business protocol considerations should be an essential part of doing business abroad. Typically, an international lawyer or cross-cultural communications consultant will offer a training course in these areas. KM can help here in the form of knowledge-based systems, whereby encoding the business protocol rules in the form of business rule engines or expert systems. In this manner, an employee going overseas to conduct business can be trained effectively and can also have a CD or web-based access to this type of business protocol advisory system.

In the coming years, there will be a merging of various communities – KM, business intelligence, and competitive intelligence. KM and business intelligence often have

an internal focus, whereas competitive intelligence takes on a more external perspective. Liebowitz (2006a) discusses the synergy of these three fields into 'strategic intelligence' – that is, how best to improve the organization's strategic decision making. The overlaps seem apparent. For example, data and text mining are discussed as part of KM and business intelligence. Social network analysis is used in KM, but the underlying link analysis is also used in competitive intelligence. Taking the best complementary approaches in each of the three fields should be applied in the future, in both domestic and multinational contexts.

Besides strategic intelligence, a key trend in most countries worldwide is the 'graying workforce'. With the baby boomer generation in the U.S. approaching retirement age, many workers will be retiring that can lead to knowledge gaps in the organization. For example, the U.S. federal government is facing some challenges in the strategic human capital area, as many of the civil servants are eligible to retire in the next few years. KM can be part of the solution to identifying, capturing, and sharing critical knowledge before it is lost. This will help towards providing carefully crafted succession planning and workforce development activities for the organization in order to cope with these human capital challenges.

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About the author

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Another important trend is dealing with the Generation Y, those who have been immersed in information technology, whether through PDAs, video games, home entertainment centers, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, Wikipedia, and the like. The Generation Xers and the Baby Boomers have different perspectives than the Generation Y that is being groomed. Cultural voids may exist between these generations, and KM may be one way to help bridge these gaps in better understanding today's younger worker.

Summary

Culture, whether organizational or societal, has a profound effect on KM. However, the converse may also be true in applying KM approaches to inform or influence culture. The years ahead look promising for the role of KM in affecting organizational culture. KM will be woven within the fabric of the organization, most likely through the human capital strategy. Future research needs to apply action research and longitudinal studies to explore the effects that KM may have upon organizational culture. Additionally, the role of trans-border knowledge flows in multinational corporations should also be explored and further analyzed. As the 'world becomes flatter', KM can hopefully become a widespread practice across the waters.

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