

The Influence of National Culture on Knowledge Sharing

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Abstract: The paper investigates the effect of national culture on organisational culture and ultimately on knowledge sharing. There has been an increasing interest in the impact of national culture on information systems and knowledge sharing research. Knowledge sharing is an activity through which knowledge is exchanged among people, friends, families, communities or organizations. However, knowledge sharing faces certain barriers. One of the major barriers to knowledge sharing is cultural differences. A number of cultural barriers to effective knowledge management have been observed in the literature.

Knowledge sharing is a key process in knowledge management practices. The aim of this research is to expand the understanding of the cultural factors that affect knowledge sharing practices. The paper is organised as follows: we start by analysing both the cultural influences and individual Influences on knowledge sharing. Secondly, we stress in a profound analysis the influence of knowledge sharing on national and organizational culture. This analysis will be based on a literature review. We describe and discuss the different barriers affecting and limiting knowledge sharing. And finally, we illustrate this analysis and theory by a real case study on national culture from the Kingdom of Bahrain (a western Asian developing country). And its effect on knowledge sharing.

Keywords: Knowledge sharing, National Culture, Organisational Culture, Cultural Barriers, KM practices, Case Study.

1 Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) is the process of collecting and identifying useful information (knowledge acquisition), transferring tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge (knowledge transfer or creation), sharing the knowledge in the repository (organizational memory), disseminating it through the whole organization (knowledge sharing), enabling employees to easily retrieve it (knowledge retrieval) and exploiting and usefully applying knowledge (knowledge leverage) (Demigha, 2015). One of the main activities of KM is “knowledge sharing”. “Knowledge sharing” is a part in KM enabling knowledge to be accessible and usable within and between selected organizations. It is a means by which, organizational member can contribute to knowledge application, innovation, and ultimately the competitive advantage of the organization (Jackson, 2006), (Ammar, Hayder and Norashikin, 2014).

“Knowledge sharing” is an activity through which knowledge (information, skills, or expertise) is exchanged

among people, friends, families, communities or organizations (Bukowitz et al., 1999), (Serban et al., 2002). The knowledge-based view of the firm stresses the importance of knowledge management in modern organizations (Grant, 1996). Cummings (2004) describes “knowledge sharing” as “the provision of receipt of task information, know-how, and feedback regarding a product or procedure”, (Cummings, 2004). Other researchers attribute the knowledge sharing to the information technology (IT) and social media. New challenging business and academia environments are characterised by globalisation, dynamism and increasing levels of complexity due to rapid changes in technology and its connected intricate knowledge. Internet-based virtual tools have created new opportunities for rapid access to information world-wide, (Siakas, 2010).

There has been an increasing interest in the impact of national culture on information systems and knowledge sharing research (Zhang, 2011). “Research on organizational learning and knowledge creation indicates that knowledge sharing, communication, and learning in

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organizations are influenced by cultural values of individual employees” (Hofstede, 2001), (Hambrick et al., 1998), (Hutchings and Michailova, 2004), (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000), from (Ardichvili, 2008). Research identified an abundant of factors that can influence the success of knowledge sharing. Some factors are found to be attributed to cultural factors (Mueller, 2014), (Pi et al., 2013), (Ardichvili et al., 2006), (Lai et al., 2007); while others argued that successful knowledge sharing is influenced by top management and motivation (Connelly et al., 2003), (Kulkarni et al., 2007), (Ammar, Hayder and Norashikin, 2014). Kharabsheh (2007) proposed a number of factors that influence the knowledge sharing. These include learning orientation, market orientation, absorptive capacity, positive interaction, trust, demographic variables, IT infrastructure, and reward system (Kharabsheh, 2007).

Hofstede, defines “national culture” as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. That means that what many members of a group have in common and by which they distinguish themselves from other groups is called culture (Hofstede, 2010). A large body of literature on culture has identified and considered these dimensions. However, none of the studies contributed to identifying those factors, which best contribute to or affect knowledge sharing success. Organizations are struggling to find the best factors that can be adopted for their organizations (Ammar, Hayder and Norashikin, 2014). However, Knowledge sharing faces some barriers and hinders. Amongst the most important is cultural differences. A number of cultural barriers to effective knowledge management have been observed (Riege, 2005), (Zhang, 2011), Rosen et al., 2007), (Zawawi et al., 2011). Little research has explored the effect of cultural differences on knowledge sharing activities.

The aim of this research is to expand the understanding of the cultural factors that affect knowledge sharing practices. The paper is organised as follows: we start by analysing both the cultural influences and individual Influences on knowledge sharing. Secondly, we stress in a profound analysis the influence of knowledge sharing on national and organizational culture. This analysis will be based on a literature review. We describe and discuss the different barriers affecting and limiting knowledge sharing. And finally, we illustrate this analysis and theory by a real case study on national culture in Bahrain and its effect on knowledge sharing.

Section 2 introduces definitions of concepts of culture, cultural and individual influences on knowledge sharing.

2 Culture, Cultural Influences and Individual Influences on Knowledge Sharing

Definitions of culture vary based on the nature of the organisations and the industry that the knowledge is being

shared. Many definitions of the concept of culture have been found in the literature review. According to Leung et al., (2005), culture is defined as “values, beliefs, norms, and behavioural patterns of a group – people in a society for national culture, staff of an organization for organizational culture, specific profession for professional culture”, (Leung et al., 2005). Culture has different layers. It includes symbols, heroes, rituals, norms, practices and values, (Hofstede, 1991), (Olie, 1995), (Karahanna et al., 2005). Hofstede classifies different levels of culture, (Hofstede, 1991). Figure 1 illustrates the different levels of culture adopted from (Hofstede, 1991).

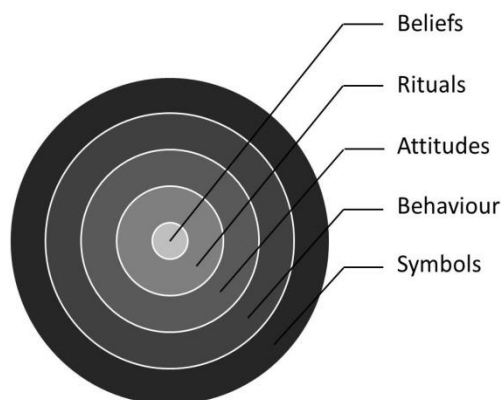


Fig.1: The different levels of culture adapted from (Hofstede, 1991).

Culture at a “social” or “national level” is the culture shared between people in a society or a country, (Hofstede, 1984). Culture that is shared between people working in an organization is called “organizational culture” (Stahl, 2003). Culture that is shared between people with a similar profession or occupation is called “professional or occupational culture or sub-culture” of a specific interest group (political party or a social class), (Myers and Tan, 2002). “Individual culture” is referred to as the “subjective culture” of an individual which is related to how much an individual takes from the different cultures that the individual is part of (Dorfman and Howell, 1988), (Karahanna et al., 2005), (Ali and Brooks, 2013).

Hofstede distinguished between four layers of culture. On the “deepest level” we find values. Values have been defined as broad preferences for one state of affairs over others to which strong emotions are attached and by which one group distinguishes itself from other groups. Values refer to such preferences as freedom over equality or equality over freedom, (Hofstede, 2010).

The research of Hofstede showed that cultural differences between nations are especially found on the “deepest level” (level of values). In comparison cultural differences among organisations located within the same national culture arena are especially identified on the level of practices. Practices

are more tangible than values, which also allows for a more precise and specific definition (Hofstede, 1991). The following section (3) defines national and organizational culture.

3 National and Organizational Culture

3.1 National Culture

“National culture” can be defined as the profile of a society with respect to norms, values, and institutions (Hofstede, 2001). There are five dimensions that allow us to classify and group countries’ national cultures: (1) individualism versus collectivism, (2) power distance, (3) uncertainty avoidance, (4) masculinity versus femininity, and (5) long-term versus short-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). A country is positioned along these five dimensions to provide an overall summary of a country’s cultural type (Hofstede, 2001). The research demonstrates that national culture often influences business practices (Brett and Okumura, 1998); but there is a lack of empirical research on knowledge sharing in multiple national cultures, (Sherry et al., 2010).

3.2 Organizational Culture

At the “organisational level”, “culture” is defined as the collective programming of the minds of group members by which one group distinguishes itself from other groups (Hofstede, 1991). Organizational culture refers to the organization’s operational process and shared values (Applegate et al., 1999) and represents the norms that guide the attitudes and behaviour of the people within an organization (Baumgartner et al., 2007). Organizational culture is akin to the culture of the society in which the organization operates (Steven, 1989). It can be considered as a micro culture within a given community or nation. Culture is reflected in an organization’s norms, value and practices (De Long et al., 2000).

3.3 Interaction of Different Levels

The influence of the different levels of culture on individual behaviour varies depending on the nature of the behaviour under investigation (Sherry et al., 2010). Behaviours including a strong social component or including terminal and moral values, national cultures might have a predominant effect. For behaviours including a strong task component or for those involving competence values or practices, organizational and professional cultures may dominate (Karahanna, et al., 2005). In an organizational structure, “national culture” is not the only type of culture that influences managerial and work behaviour, behaviour is influenced by different levels of culture ranging from the national level, through organizational levels to the group and other sub-cultures level (Hofstede, 1991); (Karahanna, et al., 2005). Straub et al., (2002) have proposed that

different layers of culture can influence an individual’s behaviour and that each individual is influenced more by certain layers and less by other layers, depending on the situation and their own personal values, (Straub et al., 2002). The various levels of culture interact and are related.

National cultural differences are composed primarily of differences in values and to a lesser extent, of differences in practices (Hofstede, 1991). Figure 2 illustrates the relative importance of values and practices at various levels of culture. Values are more important than practices in the higher level cultures (national), and practices and norms dominate the lower level of cultures (group), (Sherry et al., 2010).

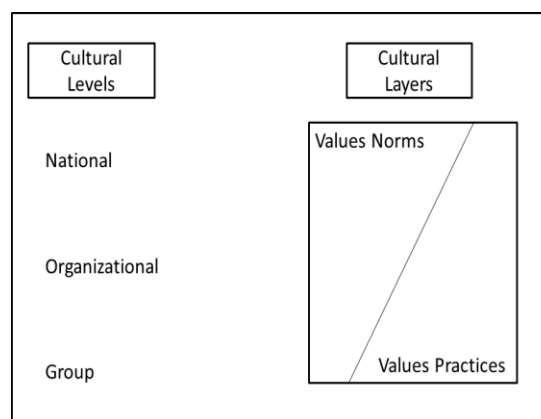


Fig. 2: Cultural Levels and Cultural Layers Adapted from (Karahanna et al., 2005).

3.4 Knowledge Sharing and Technology

Organizations and individuals need technology to communicate and share knowledge. This technology aspect can be understood from a cultural perspective, in this case connected to the norms and values in the organization. Furthermore, technology is central to knowledge sharing (Aziz et al., 2012). Learning new technologies can increase knowledge sharing within organizations.

Technology is central to knowledge sharing. The level of its usage is reflected in an organization’s norms and values related to knowledge management and the importance it places on it (Davenport et al., 1998), (Rowley, 1999), (Armstrong, 2009). Technologies such as Intranets, data warehouses, video conferencing systems, document scanning and sharing tools, and telecommunications networks are vital to facilitate knowledge sharing (Davenport et al., 1998), (Rowley, 1999) and (Armstrong, 2009). The application of IT includes data recording, storage, production of a particular transaction process by passing the information and access to the information generated, stored, transported that allows for effective and efficient manner (Baker et al., 2002). Section 4 defines some barriers affecting and limiting knowledge sharing.

4 Barriers Affecting and Limiting Knowledge Sharing

A review of the literature has provided a comprehensive list of barriers that may prevent inter-organizational knowledge sharing. Several studies identified “cultural barriers” as one of the key factors influencing the successful implementation of knowledge sharing activities in a firm (Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009). Rivera-Vazquez et al., (2009) classify cultural barriers into two levels, namely, “barriers at macro-level” based on “Hofstede’s national cultural” dimensions, and “barriers at micro-level” related to “organizational culture” as shaped by the national culture of employees working in the organization.

Hofstede (1984) developed his previously mentioned model to distinguish between countries, based on, power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Later Hofstede defines other dimensions, namely, long-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint, (Hofstede, 1984), (Hofstede, 1991), (Strang, 2009). In this context, the influence of social factors such as level of trust among employees and feeling of insecurity could influence the perceptions of knowledge sharing.

Trust is a key factor influencing the successful implementation of knowledge sharing activities in a firm (Casimir et al., 2012), (Farris et al., 1973), (McNeish et al., 2010). Hence, lack of trust is a significant barrier to knowledge sharing in firms.

Zawawi et al., (2011) classify the barrier factors into three categories, namely, individual factors, technological factors, and organizational factors. Individual barriers are factors related to the internal being of the individual, such as beliefs and perceptions (Zawawi et al., 2011). These could be linked directly or indirectly to external factors, such as the influence of national culture on the perceptions and beliefs of the individual. Organizational factors include the influence of the organizational culture, lack of proper integration between knowledge management activities and long-term goals as well as objectives of the company, lack of proper leadership, and lack of appropriate rewards in the organization (Zawawi et al., 2011). Technical factors include the unavailability of the required technological resources, including software and hardware to assist in implementation of knowledge management activities (Zawawi et al., 2011).

Section 5 provides a real case study on national culture and its effect on knowledge sharing.

5 Case study - National Culture in Bahrain and its Effect on Knowledge Sharing

Few studies have been conducted in developing countries generally and in the Gulf States specifically such as the Kingdom of Bahrain (a western Asian developing country). For example, Alalawi et al., (2007) identified critical successful factors with regard to organizational KM in the public and private sectors in Bahrain. Shajera and Albastaki (2013) studied KM readiness in the Bahraini’s’ public sectors. Shajera and Ahmad (2015) examined the relationship between knowledge management infrastructure capabilities and knowledge management process capabilities and found a positive relationship between the variables. However, little if any research has been done on the impact of national culture in Bahrain on knowledge sharing. This case aims to present major findings that resulted from the interviews conducted with expats, consultants and advisors to ministers in the kingdom of Bahrain. Furthermore, despite growing recognition of the importance of cultural influences on knowledge management, there is a lack of related empirical research (Ardichvili, Manure, Wei, Wentling and Stuedmann, 2006).

Each organization has its unique culture, which develops overtime to reflect the organization’s identity in two dimensions: visible and invisible. The visible dimension of culture is reflected in the espoused values, philosophy and mission of the firm while the invisible dimension lies in the unspoken set of values that guide employees’ actions and perceptions in the organization (McDermott and O’Dell, 2001). Organizational cultures reflect national cultures also.

5.1 Methodology

The study used a case study methodology. The researchers used a semi-structured interview of 15 experts that included Bahraini government officials, expat consultants and researchers on knowledge management in Bahrain. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The process of data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively in accordance to the interpretive research tradition (Walsham, 2006). The researchers used thematic content analysis (Bardin, 1977) to analyze the data set. The in-depth nature of an interview fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience. The interviewer seeks to understand the topic and the interview participant has the relevant experiences to shed light on it (Fontana and Frey, 1994); (Seidman, 1997). Only some major findings will be presented here.

5.2 Interview

The case attempted to answer the following question: In what way do you think the national culture affects knowledge sharing in Bahrain?

- Diversity of population and workforce – language as a sign of knowledge shared (Low uncertainty avoidance): People in Bahrain come from different backgrounds. The diversity of population is reflected

in the workplace. Rapid economic growth, particularly in the oil and construction industries, has led to a high demand for workers in Bahrain. This demand has largely been filled by a rapid increase in the number of expatriate and guest workers, especially those originating from South and Southeast Asia. According to the Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) the last official census showed that the total population of Bahrain was 1,234,571 of whom 666,172 (54%) were non-Bahraini. The total number of employed foreign workers reached 559,036 workers by the end of the third quarter 2015. The number increased compared to 521,656 workers in the same quarter a year before representing an annual growth rate of 7.2%. While the number of employed Bahrainis reached 158,182 workers this quarter representing an annual growth rate of 1.9% in comparison to 155,189 workers in the same quarter in 2014. As for the distribution of the population according to gender, 49.4% of all citizens are females, constituting 38% of the total population. As for the distribution of the population according to age, the percentage of those under the age of 9 years amount 25.9%, those between 20-64 years amount to 71.1% and those over the age of 65 amounts to 2.1%.

According to the interviewees while Arabic is the official language and English is widely used and compulsory in schools; due to the high number of expatriates living in Bahrain, other languages such as Persian and Urdu are spoken and understood in both traditional and contemporary market places. Added to this, the fact that the Bahraini Government has been adopting a policy of naturalizing long term serving workers who wish to stay in the country. Therefore, those naturalized families who became Bahrainis still maintained their home culture and language adding to the diversity within the society. While some of these language are heavily used within an ethnic working group it permeate through to other groups allowing local population to pick and adopt a lot of words from these languages.

- Openness of Bahraini society and a high degree of internationalization (Low uncertainty avoidance): Bahrain is considered to be a relatively open society that has high degrees of personal freedoms. This is reflected by the amount of foreign and Arab nationals who visit Bahrain for work and leisure. Bahrain was a preferred destination for students from the Gulf region to study for example. This necessitated the opening and staffing of educational institutions that were connected or twinned with international institutions which in a way helped even more in knowledge sharing to take place. Bahrain is also a preferred destination for nationals from neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia which can be felt by the flux of Saudis who flood the country on the weekend both as students or people seeking leisure. In addition to the

above, Bahraini nationals are amongst the most well-travelled nationals among the Gulf and possibly the Arab world which also reflects on the knowledge acquired and shared. The existence of a huge American naval base with a lot of American serving personnel increased the need for international food outlets and providers which again helped more in knowledge sharing and transfer.

- Dependence on foreign consultants as a source of knowledge experts: Bahrain depends heavily on foreign experts who work as consultants at all levels in the Bahrainis government entities and private sector. According to the interviews expats come for periods ranging from 12 months to 2 years in general. The temporary nature of their stay means that they more willing to share their knowledge with locals and other expats.
- Women's educational and communal status in Bahrain (Individualism): Bahrain has the highest education rates among Gulf and possibly Arab states. Females also enjoy a considerably high degree of personal freedom in terms work, travel marriage and all aspects of life. Indeed Bahrain was the first in the Gulf region to both have women fully participate in national elections and to elect a female MP. Bahrain was the first country in the Gulf to start education for females - the first official school for girls opened in 1928, with free education. In addition Females represent 72% of students in Bahrain.
- Family oriented businesses in Bahrain and the impact of power and knowledge generational transition: Bahrain is a small economy that characterized by a majority of SMEs. Businesses are held by families and this is supported by the government. Founding fathers due to increased competition wish to transfer knowledge and power early on to their young siblings so that they are ready on when the time comes. This resulted in a high number of young manager-owner leadership in the country. However, the only way to safeguard the company and reduce risk is by providing these young leaders of the economy with the proper knowledge in the form of consultants and foreign expats which drives a strong knowledge sharing process.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper looked at how national culture impacts on knowledge sharing in organizations. The paper used a case study from the Kingdom of Bahrain to illustrate the effect of national culture on knowledge sharing. The study used intensive interviews with 15 experts that included Bahraini government officials, expat consultants and researchers on knowledge management in Bahrain to reach conclusions. The interviews revealed some major findings. National culture may have a profound impact on organizational

culture which impacts knowledge sharing. Hofstede's cultural dimensions were used to demonstrate how national culture impacts on knowledge sharing. Using Hofstede dimensions it was shown that certain characteristics of Bahraini culture fostered better knowledge sharing. For example, diversity of work force, openness to the world, women participation, dominance of SMEs are some of the factors that increased knowledge sharing.

The results demonstrated how the culture of the organization and its hierarchical structure affects the knowledge sharing within an organization. Cultural issues, especially, national culture play an important role on knowledge sharing in firms.

It has been proven that the use of technology enables faster knowledge sharing among individuals within an organization and also enables knowledge sharing between individuals and organizational knowledge residing in knowledge management systems.

However, knowledge sharing faces certain barriers that it is essential to remove to prevent and insure knowledge sharing quality. Individual and social barriers often prevent effective knowledge sharing.

More work is needed to investigate the impact of national culture on organizational culture. Future research should also consider other factors that influence knowledge sharing such as the organizational occupational groups on knowledge sharing strategies and industry.

This case study was undertaken in Bahrain and therefore relates to the Bahraini culture and its influence on knowledge sharing the results may not applicable or generalizable on other countries in the gulf Region. A comparative study may be required to investigate differences among countries in the region.

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