



Organizational culture and willingness to share knowledge: A competing values perspective in Australian context

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Abstract

A considerable amount of research has confirmed the relationship between organizational culture and knowledge sharing behaviours. However, less research has been conducted on the impact of project sub-cultures in relation to the sharing of knowledge between projects, particularly in project based organizations (PBOs). The unique structures and contexts characterized by PBOs indicate the need to investigate further the impact of cultures present within PBOs and their effect on knowledge sharing. We report on a rich case study of four large Australian-based PBOs whereby the cultural values of these large organizations were seen to impact significantly on whether project teams were more or less likely to improve inter-project knowledge sharing. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the utility of using Cameron and Quinn's (2005) Competing Values Framework to evaluate culture in the context of PBOs.

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1. Introduction

Previous studies indicate that organizational culture (OC) can have a significant influence on the long-term success of organizations (Ajmal and Helo, 2010; Kendra and Taplin, 2004; Yazici, 2010) as well as on project performance (Coffey, 2010). For instance Coffey (2010) found that various cultural traits appear to be closely linked to objectively measured organizational effectiveness. However, only recently has the research on project management explored the link between organizational culture and knowledge management outcomes (Ajmal and Koskinen, 2008; Eskerod and Skriver, 2007; Polyani, 2011).

The context surrounding the practice of knowledge management (KM) in PBOs is complex and multifaceted. Firstly, there are a number of knowledge sources available during different

stages of a project, including experts, project teams, routines, repositories, communities of practice, knowledge gatekeepers and so on (Smyth, 2005). Secondly, there are many parties engaged in knowledge sharing including project team members, contractors, subcontractors, clients, community and other stakeholders. Finally, different types of knowledge – technical, procedural, know-what, know-how, know-why and know-when – are required during different stages of the project: planning, design, construction and closing. Nevertheless, the value contributed by knowledge in PBOs is extensive. The risk of knowledge loss at a project's end is a serious issue for organizations because accumulated knowledge throughout the project, if not effectively shared, can be irretrievably lost resulting in unnecessary reinvention, errors and time overruns (Carrillo, 2005; Fong, 2008; Landaeta, 2008; Walker et al., 2004).

Similarly, the notion of culture in a project management context is complex because a project involves a number of experts from various fields, backgrounds and professions, who typically have their own cultures and ways of working, which are not necessarily in harmony with one another or with the prevailing culture of the

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entire project (Ajmal and Koskinen, 2008). These cultural differences can either be a source of creativity and broad perspectives on organizational issues or they can be a source of difficulty and miscommunication (Anbari et al., 2010). It is therefore important that those within PBOs are aware of the type of cultures evident within various projects in order to better predict the potential consequences of cultural-related behaviours on knowledge sharing outcomes and arguably, on overall project performance.

The concepts of OC and KM as foundations to understanding how organizations behave and gain competitive advantage both have strong theoretical and empirical support (Alavi et al., 2006; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; De Long and Fahey, 2000; Sackmann, 1992). These two concepts are highly related and existing research suggests in the main that OC underpins KM activities (Gray and Densten, 2005). To be truly effective, KM requires an understanding of the culture in which it is embedded (De Long and Fahey, 2000; Fong and Kwok, 2009) and this is imperative because OC shapes members' knowledge sharing behaviours and influences how they learn.

Overall, some cultural values encourage and others impede KM activities (De Long and Fahey, 2000; Janz and Prasarnphanich, 2003). However, examining the two concepts of OC and KM in PBOs is especially challenging due to their complexity, multi-dimensional nature and context dependency. Yazici (2010) highlights that in a project management context, OC is still largely under-examined. Currently very little is known about how OC contributes to the willingness for knowledge sharing between projects. The purpose of this research is to extend previous theory on organizational culture and knowledge management in project environment and explore which cultural values are more likely to drive inter-project knowledge sharing behaviours in the context of Australian PBOs.

2. Knowledge sharing in PBOs

The criticality of quality data and information leading to effective utilization of knowledge is a well recognized component of organizational competitiveness (e.g. Alavi and Leidner, 2001; Liebowitz, 2005, 2008; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and has led to increased attempts to manage knowledge in a more systematic and effective way. PBOs, which typically function in rapidly changing and knowledge intensive environments, to be highly competitive, need to ensure the best use of their organizational knowledge. This can be achieved through the process of knowledge sharing, which allows exchange and distribution of organizational and project knowledge, and ensure its access at the right time and the right place (Bhatt, 2001; Koskinen et al., 2003). Knowledge sharing on the project level takes place as social communication between project stakeholders and through different explicit information channels such as project documentation (Arenius et al., 2003). In the inter-project context, knowledge sharing is a process through which a project is affected by the experience of another project (based on the definition provided by Argote and Ingram (2000, p. 151)). As such knowledge is defined as a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new

experiences and information, which originates in the minds of knowledge holders and is transferred into documents, organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, p. 137).

At the project level, there are a number of knowledge sources available during different stages of a project that possess or require different types of knowledge at different phases of a project life cycle (El-Gohary and El-Diraby, 2010; Smyth, 2005). Furthermore, there are multiple sources of knowledge at the inter-project level, where except for that which is human-based, including project team members, contractors, subcontractors, clients, community and other stakeholders, knowledge can be also stored in databases, lessons learned documents, post-project reports in a form of stories, advice, and contextual facts. Projects have different levels of interdependency and operate in different dimensions of time and space (Newell et al., 2008). This creates complications at an inter-project level, related to weak communication links between projects (Hobday, 2000), and time pressure (Lundin and Söderholm, 1995; Riege, 2005) that hamper knowledge sharing. These all make the process of inter-project knowledge sharing a challenging effort.

3. The concept of organizational culture

An organization's culture consists of practices, symbols, values and assumptions that the members of the organization share with regard to appropriate behaviour (Schein, 1990). The *artefacts* can include physical layout, the dress code, the manner in which people address each other and the overall feel of the place, to more permanent aspects such as archival records, products, statements and annual reports. *Values* are organizational norms, ideologies, charters and philosophies. *Basic underlying assumptions* are based on an organization's historical events that determine perceptions, thought processes, feelings and behaviour (Martin & Meyerson in Schein, 1990). The basic underlying assumptions are the least apparent, but are much more influential on behaviour than espoused artefacts and values (Schein, 1990). Consequently this research conceptualizes and later operationalizes OC primarily in terms of values. This is because values are more easily studied than basic underlying assumptions, which are invisible, and values provide rich understanding of social norms that define the rules or context for social interaction through which people act and communicate (Alavi et al., 2006; Schein, 1990).

Various studies provide evidence to suggest that cultural values influence knowledge sharing behaviours by shaping patterns and qualities of interactions needed to leverage knowledge among individuals (Alavi et al., 2006; De Long and Fahey, 2000; Gray and Densten, 2005). Culture establishes an organizational context for social interaction and creates norms regarding what is 'right' and 'wrong' (Ajmal and Koskinen, 2008; De Long and Fahey, 2000). Therefore, it can influence how people communicate and share knowledge. Furthermore, evidence suggests that organizational structure has an impact on approaches to KM (Friesl et al., 2011). For example, De Long and Fahey (2000) argue that different cultural attributes influence knowledge sharing across the organization (horizontal) and throughout the various levels of an organization (vertical). In contrast to functionally driven

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