

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS A SUB-CULTURALLY BOUND DETERMINANT—REDEFINING THE HOFSTEDE HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract:

While organizations have initiated knowledge management initiatives to systematically and methodically capture both explicit and tacit (or silent) knowledge, these initiatives have experienced mixed results. Inherent organizational idiosyncrasies have bounded the transferability and reusability of the knowledge base. Characteristics such as relevance, timeliness, but most important, cultural context, bind both the generalizable and transferable value of knowledge. For the knowledge to have value and utility, the cultural context must be taken into consideration. The problematic generalization and applicability of the Hofstede Hypothesis is redefined as a matter of statistical aggregation averages. The collectivity that establishes the essence of culture has many faces that situationally define the culture context (i.e, profession, organization, religion, and ethnicity).

Keywords: Hofstede, KM framework, decision making, sub-cultural profile

1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge and knowledge management is contextualized and situational. While organizations have initiated knowledge management initiatives to systematically and methodically capture both explicit and tacit (or silent) knowledge, these initiatives have experienced mixed results. Inherent organizational idiosyncrasies have bounded the transferability and reusability of the knowledge base. Characteristics such as relevance, timeliness, but most important, cultural context, bind both the generalizable and transferable value of knowledge. For the knowledge to have value and utility, the cultural context must be taken into consideration.

Knowledge is defined as a “mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and formation... In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and Norms” (Davenport & Prusak, 2000, p.1). Given that each organization, department, problem and problem is culturally bound, the knowledge associated with each situation can be argued to be appropriate only in similar cultural settings.

2. HOFSTEDE HYPOTHESIS RE-EXAMINED

The work of Geert Hofstede has been discussed and debated over the past 30 years. Hofstede's notion of national culture is essentially based on five conceptions. He hypothesizes that culture displays a geographic or territorial uniqueness, is nationally shared from a statistical average vantage point, is inherently mentally subjective, is determinate as the influence, displays identifiable characteristics and predictable consequences, and is enduring (McSweeney, 2003, p.7). Hofstede's dimensions of power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation (and most recently nurturing) together provide the basis of a profile that is reflective of a centered average of national cultural characteristics. Discussion, however, has emerged from numerous studies applying his data gathering questionnaire to the same national cultural entities as established by Hofstede in his initial worldwide study of IBM employees. Given the resulting cultural profiles are varied from the original Hofstede profiles; the resulting profiles are interesting through the pragmatism of providing an analytical tool to help explain cultural difference within a national context. The question becomes, what defines the national culture in what context? With the advent of readily accessible mass media, the internet, and varied social identity it can be argued that any individual may at the same time harbor the profile of multiple identities within the context of national identity. One can wear many cultural hats. Beyond national identity there is ethnic identity, professional identity, organizational identity, social/sport/hobby identity, as well as religious identity (Kohun, Skovira & Burcik, 2012). Each of which manifests cultural attributes, values, language and practice that may contradict the cultural attributes of one or more of the other cultural identities an individual may assume. Individuals manifest the cultural attributes and characteristics of the culture they self-identify with at any given point in time. Hence, in Hofstedeian terms, each of the cultural dimensions would reflect the cultural identity assumed by an individual all within the realm of a particular national context.

The Hofstede perspective: “Culture is always a collective phenomenon ... Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game. It [culture] is the collective programming of the mind that distinguished the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p. 6; see Hofstede, 1983, p. 76 for an early view; see also Kirkman et al., 2006, p. 286). There are a couple of questionable aspects of the perspective defined above. This perspective is the source of what can be called the Hofstede Hypothesis. What are the questionable aspects? The first is the word and idea of “programming”; the second is the word and idea of “mind”; there is a possible additional aspect to be noted which is the term and idea “unwritten rules of the social game”. What vocabulary or taxonomic domain is the source here? And, what ontological space affords an environment for these ideas?

Furthermore, does “programming” reference the ontological space of computer science or information science? So, programming is computing; thinking is computational. The model appropriate may be the information processing of mind. This may allow for a construal of the idea as a cognitive psychological affair. That is, reality is made, or computed, in terms of mental models (DiMaggio, 1997, p. 267) tacitly configuring situations, actions, consequences, and meanings.

Or, can “programming” as an idea be construed simply as a set of social habits, or practices? Practices as social schemes silently are in play bounding a group’s members’ activities. Analogous, perhaps, to a “program” of a social event which orders or organizes the social event as a situation of meaning; a sense-making document organizing people’s experiences; a program of frames.

Does “mind” reference the ontological domain of cognitive psychology, wherein mind is construed as a set of operative mental models, cognitive schemas, or scripts? Or, should this idea be construed as a set of social practices or social habits (Usoro & Kuofie, 2006, p. 17)? Or, can “mind” be thought of as a set of “language games” representative of a “way of life” according to Wittgenstein?

Another aspect (the third) of a programmed mind is that some of the programming consists of “unwritten rules” of social behavior; the learning of what is or is not appropriate ways of acting in situations. What is learned, of course, are programmed modules of social action. The use of “programming” denotes something else. The actions spawned by a program are not conditional or hypothetical, they are deterministic. The “mental program”, script, or mental model is a procedural instrument of action dependent on a recognized situation. And another model programs the mind to recognize the appropriate features of the situational environment.

Hofstede does not want to appear as deterministic as his words make him appear. A person’s “mental programs” on the surface of action are flexible and adaptive as they construct “practices” which are variable socially. The deep structures of mental programs rest on collectively inculcated “values” which are deterministic of behaviors, i.e., practices (Leung et al., 2005, p. 357; Javidan et al., 2006, p. 879).

So, a culture determines the value scheme which frames all personal behavior. A person’s “intellectual” and “emotional” machinery consists of the hard-core frames of values which enforce identifiable perspectives evidenced in performances and language.

All this gives rise to the Hofstede Hypothesis. This is a perspective that no one can escape the bonds of the collectivity (Hofstede, 1993, pp. 83-87), the group and language, one was born into and raised in, and that one cannot escape the bonds of the society a particular group has lived-in; that “practices” may change, but “values” are permanent (but they are programmed as a source of the practices) (Newman & Nollen, 1996, p. 754). As Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) write: “Not only organizations are culture bound; theories about organizations are equally culture bound” (p. 307).

Institutional frames such as professions and religion reflect a context and mindset that may be programmed to different cultural perspectives than prescribed by a national cultural *average*.

3. THE HOFSTEDE FOUNDATIONAL DATA IN PERSPECTIVE

The conclusion that formed the basis of Hofstede’s cultural profiles were based on Hofstede’s 2 IBM studies with a combined data sample of 117,000 questionnaires. While the 2 studies involved 66 countries, only 40 of the countries yielded scores. As a result, less than one third of the 117,000 IBM employee responses were used in the study. Additionally, 6 out of the initial 66 countries yielded more than 1,000 survey results from the combined 2 studies. Less than 200 respondents were reported in 15 countries. The only surveys returned in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore were 88, 71, and 58 respectively (McSweeney, 2003, p.9).

The actual questionnaires themselves were not designed to assess and identify attributes of a national culture but were designed by IBM as a tool to understand and analyze possible factors with respect to declining morale within the corporation. The questionnaires were not administered independently and without process. The completion of the questionnaires was not monitored for objectivity, integrity, and confidentiality. For instance, some questionnaires were not completed individually but rather in groups. Because of possible consequences and lack of confidentiality, the respondents answered subjectively, politically, and strategically. Finally, all workers were not represented; only marketing and sales staff—not blue collar workers (McSweeney, 2003, p.9). In the initial studies—was the population survey representative of a national “average” profile or a skewed organizational and/or professional culture average?

While Hofstede acknowledges the data limitations and constraints, it appears that the national cultural profile implications, in essence, took on a life of their own. While the data may not be universally

accurate, the study was both historic and important in that it was one of the first studies that provided a global corporate snapshot that was the basis for frame of analysis using generalizable observations. That is not to say that with refinement, cooperation, and design, Hofstede's questionnaire can be used in the focused context of respective professional, organizational, religious sub-cultures within the confines of a national label.

4. FLATTENING FACTORS

While the Hofstede Hypothesis provided insight to understanding and harnessing cultural differences, its analytical impact has been and still is significant. Using his mode of analysis and questionnaire provides for a consistent cultural assessment tool. The resulting analytical frames (Hofstede's five—now six—dimensions), while regarded by some only as an interesting basis of discussion, can be used in the confines of more homogeneous cultures sub-cultures such as those discussed earlier to assess the overall validity of the Hofstede Hypothesis. Nevertheless, the model and the associated cultural profiles based on aggregate averages can be effectively used to analyze the possible impacts of phenomena like the internet, social media, the EU, the financial crisis of 2008, and globalization on national cultural profile. Previous research has suggested that globalization, the internet, and social media have "flattened" the world as is evidenced by Hofstede cultural model compared values before and after the change variable had been mainstreamed (Burcik et.al, 2009). More recent research has demonstrated that after the financial crisis of 2008, cultural profiles moved/returned closer to the values established by Hofstede (Kohun et.al, 2012). The Hofstede Hypothesis and associated model and questionnaire can and should be applied to a segmented population based on a variety of demographic characteristics such as age, profession, ethnic identity, economic class, and education. The demographic segmentation can help answer questions such as the impact of social media on cultural identity and characteristics on 18 year olds versus 60 year olds. Is the profile the same? Does it change as one gets older to pre-established historical norms?

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While there is much discussion and debate over the applicability and validity of the Hofstede cultural model, Hofstede's work is oft cited, used in much research, and provides a useful frame for cultural determined knowledge management and decision making. The cultural profiles, established by the model, while the product of statistical averages and of questionable generalizability, are useful for baseline measures of change. Application to demographic, professional, organizational, and other identities may be more useful, telling and generalizable than contemporary national profiles. The framework is readily adaptable to identifiable more homogeneous sub-cultures, and hence a potential source of data that can validate the universality of the Hofstede Hypothesis to document multi-dimensional cultural profiles within the context of a national cultural environment.

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