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## Cultural barriers of knowledge management - a case of Poland

### **Abstract**

*Communication technology in last decades has seen knowledge management become a key tool for the success of a variety of institutions. Many international companies and other organizations have developed knowledge management programs as key to their future development strategies. The number of international organizations that have identified knowledge management as one of their core management tools. Yet despite its growing popularity, knowledge management remains a complex and challenging task. This article discusses how can managers and other organization members overcome cultural barriers of knowledge management.*

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, Corporate culture, Barriers, Values, Knowledge sharing

### **Introduction**

Culture plays an important role in the success of a knowledge management effort. Many examples can be found where well designed knowledge management tools and processes failed because people believed they were already sharing well enough, or that senior managers did not really support it, etc. However, no matter strong the commitment and approach to knowledge management, culture is stronger. That is why the aim of this article is to discuss how can managers and other organization member overcome cultural barriers of knowledge management.

## Knowledge management

One of the most significant challenges to understanding knowledge management is the difficulty in understanding the concept of knowledge. A common approach to this subject is the positing of a hierarchical relationship between data, information, and knowledge. This approach suggests that data holds the most basic status. When processed for practical application, data is raised to the level of information. Information, in turn, is applied by individuals to create knowledge. "Knowledge is information possessed in the mind of individuals: it is personalized information (which may or may not be new, unique, useful, or accurate) related to facts, procedures, concepts, interpretations, ideas, observations, and judgments" [Alavi & Leidner, 2001, p. 109]. Differences between information and knowledge are illustrated in table 1.

**Table 1.** Differences between information and knowledge

INFORMATION	KNOWLEDGE
Processed data	Actionable information
Simply gives us the facts	Allows making predictions, casual associations, or predictive decisions
Obtained by condensing, correcting, contextualizing, and calculating data	Lies in connections, conversations between people, experience-based intuition, and people's ability to compare situations, problems and solutions
Evolves from data; formalized in databases, books, manuals and documents	Formed in and shared among collective minds; evolves with experience, successes, failures, and learning over time.
Formalized, captured, and explicated; can easily be packaged into a reusable form	Often emerges in minds of people through their experiences

Source: Adapted from Tiwana, A. 2001. *The essential guide to knowledge management: E-business and CRM applications*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR

Knowledge Management has emerged over the last decades as a result of many intellectual, societal, and business forces. KM has become a valuable business tool. However it is a complex one, and will still be under development for a long time to come. Significant changes in the workplace have already taken place, but changes to come are expected to be greater.

## **Culture**

The role of culture in the world of business has been the subject of various research for at least twenty-five years. Researchers have studied the influence or the impact of national cultures on organizational behavior and the way managers from different cultural backgrounds interact with one another. [e.g. Adler, 2002; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, Early and Erez, 1997].

Deluga and Wallis [2009] observe that the notion of a culture is multivocal and it is characterized by a great variety of definitions functioning both in theory and in practice so a given definition may express only one, selected aspect of a culture [p. 158]. In other words, the complexity of culture makes impossible to create one, proper definition. One of the most commonly used definitions of culture, being not a complex one at the same time, in the literature on culture, negotiations and business in general has been provided by Geert Hofstede, who was the author of the first major empirical multi-country study of consequences that culture has for the field of management. Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] suggest that “culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” [p. 4]. Bjerke [2004] expresses the opinion that culture is a mechanism which fuses social structures [p. 13]. Thus culture is an output formed by a given community consisted of some bases, ideas and classes. Schwartz [qtd. in Lewicki et al. 2007] describes culture as the values, distinguishing ten essential values, namely: power, security, traditions, conformity, benevolence, universalism, self-directions, simulation, hedonism achievement and power [p. 237]. What is more, the values might cooperate with each other or there might be a conflict between them. In practice, the values which are on the opposite side of the circle tend to be in a conflict. For the purpose of this paper the definition given by Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] is the most appropriate for the working definition. It explains the term of the culture precisely, focusing on a culture as a tool which indicates an identity of a given group and underlines its unique character.

## **Cultural dimensions**

The aim of this part is to describe Hofstede's five cultural dimensions that are used in order to study the cultural norms. Hofstede and Hofstede [2007] indicate that these are the values that are the vital elements of a culture thus while conducting a research on cultural dimensions it is crucial to focus on values. The dimensions of a culture allow people to compare one culture with the other [p.33-36].

Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] claim that “Power distance can be defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” [p. 46]. Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] describe above mentioned institutions as primary layers of community, namely a family, school and workplace [p. 46]. Brown [2000] adds that power distance is able to define the range of scope to which less powerful individual approves the disparity of power within a community [p. 190]. Brown [2000] says in his book that power distance exists in every single culture yet the tolerance of this inequality varies among cultures [p. 190]. In other words, power distance indicates the degree of unequal division of power that a member of a group is able to accept. Although above mentioned division of power exists in each culture, members of given culture have different attitude toward the division thus there can distinguished high and low-power distance societies. Lebaron and Pillay [2006] observe that due to gender, race, age, education and social statues in a high-power distance culture some member’s are being considered as superior to others [p. 46]. Lebaron and Pillay [2006] suggests that “high-power distance starting points shape more formal relations, while low-power distance starting points invite more open conflict and discussion between those at different levels within an organization” [p. 47]. Thus high-power distance cultures are not as flexible and low-power distance cultures insofar as building relationships.

Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] say in their book that “individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only” [p. 401]. In other words, a member of an individualistic society is concentrated on his own interests and interests of his relatives. Hofstede [2005] adds that there are only few societies in the world which might be called individualistic, great majority of societies are more interested in common good than thus these societies are called collectivist [p. 74]. Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] define collectivism as “societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-group’s, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” [p. 76]. Thus the most important aspect which distinguishes collectivistic societies is a close bond between members of a group.

Individualistic societies focus on the idea of self-actualization while collectivistic societies put emphasis on the common objectives of the group. Individuality and individual rights tend to be the crucial values for high individual cultures. In contrast, in collectivistic cultures there is a close tie between people, they take responsibility for other members of a group, they protect one another in exchange for loyalty. Hofstede and Hofstede [2005]

mention that there is a negative correlation between individualism and power distance, namely, a country which is long-power distance is collectivist, whilst small-power distance countries are individualist [p. 82].

Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] suggest that “Masculinity stands for a society in which emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success; women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” [p. 402]. Thus in a masculine society there is a strongly visible division between a role which is played by a man and that played by a woman. According to Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] the contrary of masculine society is feminine one which is defined as society where men’s and women’s roles dovetail [p. 120]. They claim in their book that masculine and feminine societies vary in solving global conflicts, namely feminine countries aim to negotiations and consensus whilst masculine societies achieve their goals by fight [Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005 p.150].

Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] explain that “Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” [p. 403]. In other words, uncertainty avoidance index indicates the degree to which members of a given community feel nervous in an unknown situation. Brown [2000] makes an important point that countries whose uncertainty avoidance index is weak tend to be contemplative, less aggressive and relax whilst countries with strong uncertainty avoidance seem to be more active, aggressive and intolerant [p. 190]. Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] theorize that communities with strong avoidance index tend to create wide range of laws and regulations in order to prevent uncertainty [p. 182]. They add that countries with weak avoidance index use more often common sense [Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005 p.184]. To sum up, people derived from a high uncertainty avoidance culture fully respect the law and other regulations. In contrast, a low uncertainty avoidance culture is not as rule-oriented, accepts changes and is able to risk to the challenge.

Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] define the term long-term orientation as “The fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular perseverance and thrift” [p. 401]. As far as the short term orientation is concerned, Hofstede and Hofstede [2005] claim that the short term orientation is “The fostering of virtues related to the past and present- in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of ‘face’, and fulfilling social obligations” [p. 401]. They mention that the opposite of long-term orientation is short-term orientation where people respect the tradition and their main aim is past and present [Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005 p. 210]. In other words, long-term orientated countries accept changes with ease whilst countries which have short term orientation

are more conventional and traditional. Taking Hofstede's and Hofstede's [2005] view of the situation key features of short term orientation are as follows: veneration of tradition, involvement in personal stability, social status and obligations, actions which will produce immediate results [p. 210]. They remark that perseverance as a tool which will bring slow results, veneration of circumstances and forethought are the key features of long-term orientation [Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005, p. 210]. To conclude, the crucial value of a long-term orientation culture is long-lasting commitment whilst short-term orientation culture is more flexible thus changes occur more frequently and rapidly. People derived from long-term orientation culture tend to accept slow results and are more persistent to achieve their aims.

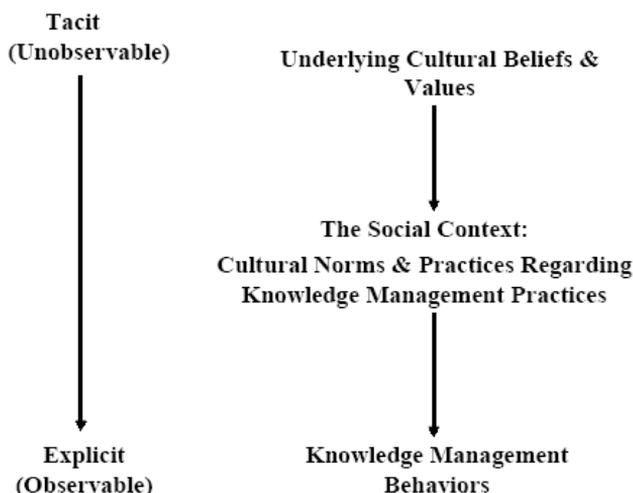
### **Knowledge management and culture**

Knowledge management efforts often are seen to encounter difficulties from culture and, as a result, to have limited impact [DeLong & Fahey, 2000; O'Dell & Grayson, 1998]. Ernst and Young conducted a study that identified culture as the biggest impediment to knowledge transfer, citing the inability to change people's behaviors as the biggest hindrance to managing knowledge [Watson, 1998]. Another study of 453 firms, showed that over half of the companies indicated that organizational culture was a major barrier to success in their knowledge management initiatives [Ruggles, 1998].

Organizational culture determines the social context which determines "who is expected to control what knowledge, as well as who must share it, and who can hoard it" [DeLong & Fahey, 2000, p. 118]. Figure 1 illustrates this linkage between culture and knowledge management behavior.

Consulting firms such as KPMG report that a major aspect of knowledge management initiatives involves working to shape organizational cultures that hinder their knowledge management programs [KPMG, 1998]. Many research findings [Hasan & Gould, 2001; Schultze & Boland, 2000] help to demonstrate the profound impact that culture may have on knowledge management practice and of the crucial role of senior management in fostering cultures conducive to these practices [Brown & Duguid, 2000; Davenport, DeLong, & Beers, 1998; DeLong & Fahey, 2000; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000; Hargadon, 1998; KPMG, 1998; von Krogh, 1998].

**Figure 1.** The impact of organizational culture on knowledge management behaviours



Source: D. Leidner, M. Alavi, T. Kayworth, The Role of Culture in Knowledge Management: A Case Study of Two Global Firms, *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, 2(1), 2006, pp. 17-40

Studies on the role of culture in knowledge management have focused on such issues as the effects of organizational culture on knowledge sharing behaviours [DeLong & Fahey, 2000] and the influence of culture on the capabilities provided by knowledge management [Gold, Malhotra & Segars, 2001] as well as on the success of the knowledge management initiative [Baltahazard & Cooke, 2003]. More specifically, Baltahazard and Cooke [2003] ascertained that constructive cultures (emphasizing values related to achievement, affiliation, and self-actualization, encouragement) tended to achieve greater knowledge management success. Similarly, Gold, et al. [2001] found that more supportive, encouraging organizational cultures positively influence knowledge management infrastructure capability and resulting knowledge management practice. Finally, Jarvenpaa and Staples [2001] determined that organizational cultures rating high in solidarity will result in a perception of knowledge as being owned by the organization.

## Knowledge management a case of Poland

Poland is characterized by high level of power distance and uncertainty avoidance and average individualism. As for the dimension of masculinity Poles are slightly above average. Similar are the results of research conducted by Sitko-Lutek, which claims that Polish society is characterized by high power distance index and uncertainty avoidance, task orientation, passive attitude, and high level of masculinity.

Referring to the previously mentioned Hofstede's dimensions of culture, knowledge-based organization should have the following characteristics:

- Low power distance – reduction of the diversity and inequality among workers is beneficial to cooperation and sharing of knowledge. The researchers say that increased workers' control reduces their commitment to work and thus weakens the pursuit of innovative solutions, acquisition of new knowledge and willingness to share an existing or newly acquired knowledge. In case of Poland we deal with high uncertainty avoidance. There is evidence that the formal organizational structure has a negative effect on knowledge management. Effective organizations allow the flow of knowledge no matter what function or role of the employee. This is achieved by introducing proper organizational structure (decentralization) and assigning lower-level workers decision-making power.

- Low level of uncertainty avoidance leads to acceptance of the uncertainty associated with risky ventures and facilitates the search for innovative approaches. According to Hofstede [2005] societies with high uncertainty avoidance are accompanied by high stress, anxiety and a sense of constant threat. These societies are characterized by risk aversion and lack of tolerance and cautious approach to new products and technologies, the desire for stability of employment and the rare attempts to change career paths, low levels of innovation, and developed bureaucracy, conservatism and respect for law and order. The high level of uncertainty avoidance is an obstacle to the search for optimal solutions for the organization. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance tend to accept routine and formalized procedures.

- Low level of individualism - enables work in a team and group learning. In the Polish case we are dealing with collective individualism. Its specific feature is the desire to achieve the objectives of individualist by membership in a group that helps achieve the goal. Stor believes that the Poles value belonging to the group, but at all costs try to protect their own identity. They will support the objectives of the company, but only as long as they are compatible with their personal goals. Glińska-Noweś claims that Polish individualism is manifested by the individual objectives, actions and declining loyalty to the organization

- High level of masculinity - the ambitious goals and a desire to compete can drive the progressiveness and innovation. In case of Poland we deal with moderately above average level. However, to effectively compete in the global economy, one needs to learn strategies for successful implementation of new technologies. Culture characterized by high rates of masculinity is more effective in the absorption and diffusion of new technologies in the context of the organization. Mikułowski-Pomorski refers to the results of studies showing evidence of the low degree of masculinity in Polish society. However, this argument does not confirm the existence of a diversity of roles of women and men in society, still considerable emotional division of responsibilities (women) and material (men), the emphasis on high wages, treatment of homosexuals as a social threat, etc.

### Summary

In the Knowledge Economy, knowledge is the most valuable asset and the only source of sustainable competitive advantage. Increasingly, what organisations know determines the degree of business success. Poland scores high in Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance, average in Individualism, are moderately above average in Masculinity as compared to Hofstede's database results. These culture characteristics do not form an environment in which KM initiatives can easily flourish. That is why Polish managers must pay much attention to develop organizational culture that way that it supports KM.

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