

Knowledge management in a multicultural environment: a South African perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Numerous authors contend that there are dissimilarities in the way people, especially those from different cultural backgrounds, interpret or accept knowledge sharing. Ribiere and Sitar argue that, as a result of their educational systems, western cultures do not encourage a social exemplar of knowledge sharing. Yeh and Ma concur, arguing that western cultures are more likely to embrace values of self-determination, independence and the attainment of personal interest. In contrast, Yang argues that Asian cultures nurture a sharing and teamwork environment or approach to activities. Very little is mentioned in literature about knowledge sharing in African cultures and/or African organisations. Specifically, not much is known regarding knowledge sharing in settings where the roles of dominance of one culture over another are reversed or neutralised, either by force or law, or by natural progression. The purpose of this paper is to address this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – Being in the fortunate position of working for a culturally diversified multinational organisation based in South Africa, one of the authors was able to determine, on a first-hand basis, how different cultural backgrounds impact upon knowledge sharing. In the organisation under review, research subjects' opinions on knowledge sharing, culture and other knowledge management (KM) issues were surveyed by means of a structured questionnaire consisting of 21 descriptive questions. Phenomenological research was chosen since it is a qualitative research method that attempts to understand participants' perspectives, perceptions and views of a

phenomenon. The analysis that follows consists of descriptive statistics used for each question, as well as the testing of hypotheses regarding the relationships between explanatory and response variables.

Findings – As in other studies, cultural issues such as language proficiency, education and schooling, gender biases, age and work experience, were all found to influence the knowledge-sharing inclination of individuals either directly or indirectly. However, when individuals have been exposed to past political turmoil leading to present empowerment policies such as affirmative action, knowledge distribution takes on a different dimension – one in which knowledge sharing becomes a power play. African individuals, irrespective of whether they are black or white, display much more of a sense of power in knowledge sharing than do their European counterparts.

Introduction

Heralded by many as the new secret weapon of organisations, knowledge management (KM) has become a very important commodity in providing organisations with the competitive edge they all hunger for. KM has always been around – think, for instance, of the expert goldsmith passing on his trade secrets to his eager apprentice or the patient father teaching his son the intricacies of riding a bicycle. It seems strange then that it was not until about 10 to 15 years ago that KM was recognised as an important factor in the business arena (Hansen *et al.*, 1999). Since then the economy has moved from being capital-intensive to one that embraces knowledge as the new vital resource (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). This has resulted in practically every organisation buying into the KM phenomenon, many not realising that KM requires considerable planning and change management, resulting in their endeavours failing dreadfully (Nasir, 2003).

Establishing successful KM is by no means a straightforward feat, and organisations have a multitude of factors to take into account before embarking on a KM initiative. Authors such as Hasanali (2002) and Snyman and Kruger (2004) argue that business strategy, leadership, culture, senior management support and structure are all factors critical to the success of KM. However, of all these factors, culture is frequently recognised as the key “make-or-break factor” in successful KM systems (Damodaran and Olphert, 2000);

Ribiere and Sitar, 2003). Named as the biggest barrier to KM success by 37.8 per cent of respondents in a survey held by Knowledge Management Review (2001), culture is by no means a minor issue and demands concentrated attention from management practitioners. Cultural issues alone are reason enough for an organisation to throw in the towel before it has even embarked upon knowledge management endeavours. Diversified companies normally have a number of languages spoken within them, not to mention different ethnic groups and tribes, all adding to the task at hand with regard to successful KM. To instil a knowledge-sharing culture is not an easy task.

Organisational culture comprises of many dimensions and levels, and can be compared to a tree (McDermott and O'Dell, 2001). The roots represent the core values, and the management style of the organisation, and individual behaviour the main stem of the tree. The branches and leaves extending from the stem symbolise the stories, myths and legends, the philosophies and values, as well as the structures and systems within the organisation. Culture also consists of visible elements, such as décor and buildings or expressed elements such as the organisation's vision, but there are other unarticulated elements as well, “rooted within the organisation's core values and assumptions” (McDermott and O'Dell, 2001, p. 78). Ideally an organisation's knowledge-sharing culture should therefore be embedded in the roots, instilling within employees a perception that behaviour derived from core values is natural, to be taken for granted, instead of it being yet another compulsory action enforced by top management.

Knowledge-sharing in a multicultural environment: the South African scenario

Deep-rooted political and social requirements to integrate cultures, not in a manner where one culture dominates while others become extinct over time (Prime, 1999), make the South African environment unique in many aspects. Challenged to merge Western cultures with African cultures, the South African environment can provide a clairvoyant perspective on the future of all business – an environment characterised by continued change, diversity and even elements of silent intolerance and conflict (Finestone and

Snyman, 2005). Since most people are aware of South Africa's past and most recent political history, we will not indulge in profound and detailed discussions of the South African scenario, except in the case of a few factors believed to affect knowledge sharing either directly or indirectly. One of these factors is the policy of affirmative action, which, according to Finestone and Snyman (2005), has the potential to cause a different kind of social dilemma. In empowering one group whilst sanctioning another, job security is influenced, consequently leading to unwillingness among people to share knowledge.

Another barrier to knowledge sharing in the South African context is the issue of language. People are reluctant to share knowledge if they cannot understand concepts or find it difficult to get their message across. Language problems in South Africa are compounded by the existence of nine ethnicities, each with its own communities, cultural languages and parlance (Prime, 1999). As a result of having to deal with eleven official languages, communication, which is a major element of knowledge sharing, is often severely hampered. In addition, different communication styles are more prevalent in different cultures. White South Africans predominantly adhere to Western culture, preferring an explicit style of communication such as written commitments (i.e. contracts) as the main indication of trust. In contrast, Black African cultures are more implicit in their manner of communication, in which oral communication is preferred. Strongly linked to the previous point is the way in which South African organisations are managed. Three management styles (Eurocentric, Afro-centric and Synergistic Inspirational) directly or indirectly influence South African businesses. The Eurocentric approach, a predominantly western value system, emphasises characteristics such as individualism and self-centeredness (Prime, 1999). Due to the impact of colonialism and the legacy left by repressive policies of the past, such as separate development, the Eurocentric approach is still dominant in South Africa. Unfortunately, the oppressive policies of the past engendered a lack of trust towards all that is considered alien and foreign. Previously disadvantaged groups still consider Euro-centrism to be an extension of oppression, arguing that it leads to a socialisation of people according to identification

of race and ethnicity. A major section of South African society and business therefore strongly resents any form of Euro-centrism.

The second approach, an Ubuntu-based system, embraces Afro-centricity, which basically encourages the use of “home base” in dealing with challenges, whether these are internal or external to the organisation. Ubuntu-type thinking is considered to be inclusive, in contrast to the Euro-centric approach, which is regarded as exclusivist. The Ubuntu approach is characterised by a strong sense of community and belonging, supportiveness, solidarity, approachability of management and freely available information. In general, the Ubuntu mindset is opposed to individualism, embracing collectivism instead, which emphasises the social unit (Prime, 1999).

The Synergistic Inspirational approach, on the other hand, is one that embraces both the approaches mentioned above. It involves the merging of time-honoured African management practices, principles and philosophies with Western management methods. Many believe that this is the best approach for South African organisations to follow, since it incorporates inclusivism by seeking unity in diversity, basically promoting the development of common values, in addition to building trust and respect when values differ.

The data collection process

One of the authors of this article is fortunate enough to be working for an extremely diversified multinational organisation[1] based in South Africa, and was able to determine, on a first-hand basis, how different cultural backgrounds impact upon knowledge sharing. A thorough analysis of the literature provided a sound theoretical foundation for the empirical research that followed. Different opinions expressed in the literature surrounding the formulation of a theoretical model were used to develop a set of statements, which focused on determining users' perceptions of knowledge sharing, culture and other KM issues. An iterative process of review and refinement resulted in the formulation of a questionnaire consisting of 21 personalised questions – the first seven questions (age, gender, home language, educational language, siblings, line of

work, number of years in a particular line of work) obtaining demographics and the remaining 14 questions focusing on the opinions of the respondents regarding knowledge sharing within the organisation. The sample size consisted of 128 employees from different cultural backgrounds. When personally distributing the questionnaires one of the researchers explained the reasoning behind the study and also assured respondents that anonymity would be preserved. All data collected were carefully prepared for tabular and graphic representation, analysis and interpretation. Statements were formulated in the first person to give users the opportunity to reflect on their personal experience and perceptions. Likert-type scales were used to express the degree of agreement with the personalised statements. The computer software used for analysis and modelling of the dataset was SAS version 8, from the SAS Institute. All graphs and figures were created using Microsoft Excel.

In order to give a true reflection of the organisation's demographics, the sample population consisted of individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Limited time, logistical limitations and a focus on providing insights rather than generating quantitative results made it impractical and unnecessary to include all personnel. Questionnaires were purposefully given to individuals from different hierarchical levels within the organisation, to determine the significance of these levels as regards the propensity for knowledge sharing. The sample chosen was therefore not only representative of the managerial levels present in the organisation, but also of all forms of diversity, in order to give a good indication and hence reliable results.

An objective stance was maintained in analysing all research results. However, human understanding and interpretation, both important factors contributing to valid knowledge (Cornford and Smithson, 2004, p. 162), meant that the interpretation of results (compared to the analysis of results) had to be done in a more subjective and “interpretive” manner. The analysis that follows therefore consists of the descriptive statistics[2] used for each question as well as the hypothesis testing of the relationships between explanatory and response variables[3]. Where the probability of exceeding the norm (p-value) was found to be less than 0.05, the decision rule was to reject the null hypothesis at a 5 per cent level

of significance. Relationships described are therefore all relationships where the probability of exceeding the norm was found to be less than 0.05 – in other words, only the related variables are described.

Results obtained

Sample distribution of making use of others' knowledge to perform daily duties

According to the analysis, approximately 59 per cent of the respondents frequently made use of their colleagues' knowledge to perform daily duties. Compared to this, only 27.34 per cent of respondents made use of it occasionally. This illustrates that most employees in this organisation made use of their colleagues' knowledge on a regular basis, providing evidence that knowledge sharing may well be common practice in the organisation.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of making use of others' knowledge within this organisation were as follows:

- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: p -value = 0.0005. A total of 31.25 per cent of German-speaking respondents in the organisation indicated that they always made use of others' knowledge on a daily basis to perform their duties. In contrast, only 7.81 per cent of Afrikaans-speaking respondents always made use of colleagues' knowledge to perform their daily duties. Running against the grain of Ubuntu, no respondents speaking African languages indicated that they always made use of others' knowledge. However, 68.75 per cent indicated that they often do.
- School language – probability of exceeding the norm: p -value = 0.0002. A total of 37.04 per cent of German-speaking respondents who had received education in their home language were more likely always to make use of others' knowledge, compared to only 9.09 per cent of their English counterparts who were more likely to do so. Only 5.71 per cent of people who had received schooling in Afrikaans said they always made use of others' knowledge to perform their daily duties.

The results indicated that German-speaking (European) respondents are more likely to make use of others' knowledge/experience to perform their day-to-day jobs, than their counterparts who speak Afrikaans or African languages. The possible reason for this is that most of the German-speaking people in the organisation are expatriates from Germany who come and work in the organisation, typically for a period of two years or less. There is a close alliance between the different sister plants in Germany and it is well known that there are excellent networking opportunities for colleagues between these different plants, which makes them more prone to use other colleagues' knowledge. In contrast, the South African plant does not network regularly with the sister plants because of the geographical distances involved. This could also be attributable to the language barriers that exist. Respondents who speak Afrikaans (a form of Dutch indigenous primarily to white South Africans) and those who speak African languages in the organisation do not make use of colleagues' knowledge on a regular basis to complete their daily tasks. This could be attributed to the education system in South Africa encouraging individualism rather than team-based learning techniques, especially since these respondents attended school before the new syllabi, which have a greater emphasis on teamwork, were introduced.

The above-mentioned finding is supported by the result of comparing educational language to knowledge-sharing proneness. Cognisance must be taken of the fact that African respondents received education in either Afrikaans or English. Respondents who were taught in Afrikaans were not trained to make use of their fellow students' knowledge to complete their tasks, and this probably carried over into their work lives. Similarly, very few English-speaking respondents were found to have made use of their colleagues' knowledge to perform their daily duties, although percentages of them who did indeed do so were found to be higher than among their Afrikaans-speaking counterparts. No German-speakers indicated that they never or even sometimes made use of others' knowledge. This indicates that they either often or always made use of others' knowledge.

Sample distribution of those making use of others' knowledge to perform their daily duties

Approximately 54 per cent of respondents felt that others often made use of their knowledge or expertise to complete their daily duties. Sixteen per cent felt that others always used their knowledge, and 30 per cent were of the opinion that their knowledge was only sometimes called upon by their colleagues.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of others making use of their knowledge in this organisation were as follows:

- Age – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0365$. A total of 22.50 per cent of respondents over the age of 40 years stated that others always made use of their knowledge on a daily basis to perform their duties. In contrast, only 9.52 per cent of respondents below 25 years of age felt that colleagues always made use of their knowledge to perform their daily duties.
- Gender – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0005$. A total of 65 per cent of males stated that others often made use of their knowledge to complete their daily duties. Compared to this, 37.50 per cent of females felt that colleagues often made use of their knowledge.

Findings revealed that in the organisation, the older respondents' knowledge was more likely to be called upon by others than the younger generation's knowledge. This could be due to the fact that older people are generally still considered to be wiser and more knowledgeable, being more familiar with policies and procedures. An interesting finding is that more male respondents than female ones were of the opinion that others made use of their knowledge on a regular basis to complete their daily tasks in the organisation. This hints at the fact that males consider their knowledge to be more in demand than their female counterparts do.

Level of enjoyment experienced from learning from knowledge/experience of others in the organisation

A total of 56 per cent of respondents said that they strongly agreed that they derived enjoyment from learning from others' knowledge or experience in the workplace, whereas only 1 per cent disagreed with this statement.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of enjoyment being experienced while making use of others' knowledge were as follows:

- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0459$. A total of 70.59 per cent of English-speaking respondents strongly agreed that they enjoyed learning from others' knowledge, while 64 per cent of German-speaking respondents also strongly agreed that they enjoyed this. A total of 50 per cent of Afrikaans-speaking people agreed that they enjoyed learning from others in the organisation. However, only 33.33 per cent of African people derive some degree of enjoyment out of learning from others in the organisation.

English and German-speaking respondents are therefore more likely to enjoy making use of others' knowledge than people who speak Afrikaans or African languages. The reason for this is not immediately evident. The following factor is a possible cause of this phenomenon. Since the South African education system in the past did not encourage team work but rather took pride in an individual's own knowledge and skills, this resulted in individuals' pride getting in the way of their knowledge-sharing capabilities, making them feel incompetent and hence lowering the enjoyment derived from making use of another's knowledge. Sharing is therefore considered a sign of weakness and there may be a sort of stigma attached to asking for help.

Level of enjoyment experienced from sharing knowledge/experience with others in the organisation

A total of 65 per cent of respondents stated that they strongly agreed that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge with colleagues. Thirty per cent said that they agreed somewhat that they experienced enjoyment when sharing their knowledge with others. A total of 5

per cent of respondents said that they disagreed somewhat that they derived enjoyment from sharing their knowledge with colleagues, whereas no one said that they strongly disagreed about enjoying sharing their knowledge.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of enjoyment being experienced when someone made use of their knowledge were as follows:

- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0477$. A total of 70 per cent of African respondents said that they strongly agreed that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge with others in the organisation. A total of 67 per cent of English-speaking people and 65 per cent of Afrikaans-speaking people strongly agreed with this statement. However, only 53 per cent of German respondents indicated that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge with their colleagues.
- Gender – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0517$. A total of 72 per cent of males strongly agreed that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge with their colleagues whereas about 52 per cent of females strongly agreed that they enjoyed sharing their knowledge with others.

It is interesting to see that these results are quite different from the previous finding. Respondents from African and Afrikaans language backgrounds were more than happy to share their knowledge with others. The reason for this can be attributed to African culture (whether white or black), in terms of which it is prestigious to be able to help or advise someone less knowledgeable. Furthermore, it is believed that it provides the individual (knowledge bearer) with the opportunity to prove his or her “worth” so to speak, possibly a legacy left over from previous oppressive (apartheid) days. The German-speaking population, however, were less likely to enjoy sharing their knowledge with others, whereas before they stated they would derive great enjoyment from making use of others' knowledge. This is evidence of a knowledge-hoarding culture. Individuals are eager to learn but not to share knowledge, hence the hoarding. Another interesting finding is that males derive more enjoyment from sharing their knowledge with others than females do.

This can be attributed to the power factor that comes from knowing something your colleagues do not, which definitely does the male ego no harm.

Degree to which respondents had difficulty in communicating their knowledge to others

A total of 52 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that they had no difficulty in communicating their knowledge to others in the organisation. About 35 per cent agreed somewhat that they had no difficulty communicating, hinting at the fact that there may be some difficulties. A total of 13 per cent disagreed somewhat, stating that they occasionally had problems in communicating with their colleagues when it comes to knowledge sharing.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of respondents experiencing difficulties when communicating with others in the organisation were as follows:

- Experience – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0214$. A total of 73.33 per cent of respondents who had been working in that particular line of work for eight years or more were more likely to strongly agree that they did not have difficulty in communicating their knowledge with colleagues. Respondents working there for three or less years account for 52.17 per cent who strongly agreed there were no communication barriers between them and their colleagues with regard to knowledge sharing.
- Siblings – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0018$. In this category, respondents with more siblings found it easier to communicate than those who did not have any. A total of 34 per cent of respondents with no or one sibling strongly agreed that they had no problem communicating their knowledge to their colleagues. Compared to this, 63.64 per cent of respondents with three or more siblings felt strongly that they could communicate their knowledge to their colleagues without any problems.

The reason for the above question was to determine whether or not the level of experience and having siblings would influence their answers. It was found that years of

experience in a particular line of work did increase the effectiveness of communicating one's knowledge to others. Furthermore, it was found that respondents with siblings found it easier to communicate than those who did not have siblings. This phenomenon could be attributed to the fact that people, from an early age, learn to communicate and share with their sibling(s) and this skill is then carried over into their working lives. The inverse was also asked, namely whether or not respondents were more likely to have difficulty in understanding knowledge/expertise that is communicated to them by others.

Degree to which respondents had difficulty in understanding knowledge communicated to them by others

A total of 45 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that they had no problems understanding knowledge communicated to them by others in the workplace. A total of 50 per cent agreed somewhat, and 5 per cent disagreed somewhat that they experienced no problems.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of having difficulty in understanding knowledge communicated by colleagues were as follows:

- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0542$. A total of 37.5 per cent of German-speaking respondents strongly agreed that they had no problem understanding knowledge that was communicated to them by others in the organisation. A total of 41.67 per cent of respondents who speak African languages also strongly agreed that they had no problems in understanding knowledge communicated to them by their colleagues.

Respondents who speak German and those who speak African languages both had difficulty in understanding knowledge when colleagues in the organisation communicated it to them. It can be argued that the language barrier was the reason for this problem, possibly due to the fact that English and Afrikaans are the languages more commonly spoken at this organisation, making German and other native African languages minority languages.

Degree to which respondents felt that the corporate culture encouraged sharing in the work place

A total of 35 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that the corporate culture encouraged knowledge sharing, as compared with 52 per cent who only agreed to some extent. A total of 13 per cent of respondents disagreed somewhat that the corporate culture encouraged sharing.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of respondents feeling that the organisation's culture encourages sharing were as follows:

- Occupation – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0046$. A total of 50 per cent of respondents working in the service-oriented sector disagreed somewhat that the corporate culture encouraged sharing. A total of 35 per cent of people in managerial positions disagreed somewhat that the corporate culture encouraged sharing.
- Experience – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0419$. A total of 42.11 per cent of respondents with three years or less experience strongly agreed that the corporate culture encouraged knowledge sharing. This figure declines to just over 17.95 per cent among respondents with between four and seven years of experience. However, for respondents with more than eight years' experience, this figure climbs again to 43.33 per cent.

An interesting finding is that most respondents who had three or fewer years of experience at the organisation were more likely to feel that the organisation had a corporate culture that encouraged knowledge sharing. However, this feeling decreased with individuals who had between four and seven years' experience in their particular line of work. The reason for this is manifold, perhaps due to inexperienced individuals not being exposed to the organisation as yet, therefore not yet having perceived the lack of knowledge sharing. Another reason is that knowledge sharing simply decreases among people who have had more experience, since it can be assumed that at this stage people will be competing for promotion, resulting in them being assisted less by their colleagues, because knowledge is then considered to constitute their competitive advantage. This

contention is supported by the fact that individuals who had eight or more years of experience agreed that the organisation's culture was supportive of knowledge sharing. One can contend that these people are confident in their knowledge and secure in their jobs, which would thus allow them more knowledge sharing in their everyday work lives.

Degree to which respondents felt that government policies such as the Employment Equity Act encouraged knowledge sharing

Only 15 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that government policies encouraged knowledge sharing, and 42 per cent agreed somewhat. A total of 27 per cent of respondents felt that they disagreed somewhat and 16 per cent said that they strongly disagreed that policies such as Employment Equity Act encouraged knowledge sharing. The following factors were found to be related to the frequency of respondents' feelings about whether or not government policies, specifically the Employment Equity Act, encouraged knowledge sharing:

- Experience – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0038$. A total of 14.55 per cent of respondents who had three years or less experience strongly agreed that government policies such as the Employment Equity Act encouraged knowledge sharing, with the same number disagreeing totally. A total of 32.43 per cent of respondents with between four and seven years of experience strongly disagreed that government policy encouraged knowledge sharing, and 8.11 per cent of respondents in this category strongly agreed. A total of 24.14 per cent of respondents with more than eight years of experience strongly agreed that government policy encouraged knowledge sharing, and 29.69 per cent disagreed somewhat with this statement.
- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0005$. A total of 34.21 per cent of Afrikaans-speaking people agreed somewhat that government policy encouraged knowledge sharing. Compared to this, 50 per cent of respondents who spoke African languages agreed somewhat with this statement, with 50 per cent totally agreeing. English-speaking respondents came third, with 33 per cent agreeing somewhat.

This question was asked specifically to determine whether or not respondents felt that affirmative action in the workplace in some way influenced their readiness to share knowledge with colleagues, especially those of a different race or language and who could be potential rivals in the workplace.

It is interesting to see that people with less experience are less likely to agree to the statement that certain government policies, specifically the Employment Equity Act, encouraged knowledge sharing in the workplace. Views and opinions were quite varied, especially among respondents with differing years of experience. As the number of years of experience increases, respondents were more likely to agree that government policies encouraged knowledge sharing. Respondents who had eight years' or more experience were more likely to agree that knowledge sharing is encouraged by government policies such as Employment Equity. Respondents with less experience are likely to be younger people who have only recently applied to or joined the organisation and are therefore the ones who have been most affected by this policy. The next relationship found in the analysis, namely language, shows how this relationship is divided, where half the respondents who spoke African languages were more than likely to agree that this statement was true, whereas approximately 32 per cent of English and Afrikaans-speaking individuals agreed somewhat.

Degree to which respondents had no problem about others taking credit for work which resulted from their knowledge

A total of 30 per cent of respondents agreed somewhat that they had no problem about others taking credit for work which resulted from their knowledge, with only 9 per cent strongly agreeing. A total of 35 per cent disagreed somewhat with this statement, while 26 per cent of respondents strongly disagreed with it, which meant that they did indeed have a problem with others taking credit for their work.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of respondents having no problem with others taking credit for work that resulted from their knowledge were as follows:

- Age – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0006$. A total of 35.71 per cent of respondents who were 25 years old and younger strongly disagreed with this statement, which meant that they did have a problem with others taking credit for work which had resulted from their knowledge. A total of 19.57 per cent of people between the ages of 26 and 39 strongly disagreed with this statement and 22.50 per cent of respondents over the age of 40 strongly disagreed with having no problem about sharing their knowledge with others in the organisation.
- Gender – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0014$. A total of 43.75 per cent of female respondents strongly disagreed with this statement. In other words they did have a problem with others taking credit for work which had resulted from their knowledge/experience. A total of 15 per cent of male respondents totally disagreed and thus had a problem with others taking credit for work resulting from their knowledge/experience.

Most of the respondents who disagreed with the above statement were younger than 25 years of age, which probably means that individuals who are just starting their careers consider their knowledge as something that gives them a competitive edge over their colleagues – a stepping-stone in climbing the corporate ladder. The respondents between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-nine years were less likely to disagree with this statement, and it can be assumed that at this stage individuals are settled in their jobs and thus now use their knowledge as a “power” tool to build their reputation within the organisation as its most knowledgeable and competent person. Once again, older respondents were more likely to have a problem with sharing if this resulted in someone else getting credit for it. At this stage a person's knowledge again becomes his or her competitive advantage, possibly to avoid demotion or to ensure promotion into senior positions. Interestingly, female respondents were more likely to have a problem with others taking credit for work resulting from their knowledge than were males. The possible reasons could be that women, until recently, and maybe still even today, could be victims of gender discrimination when it comes to promotion, which would hamper their knowledge sharing in the workplace. Another possibility could be that a male's

sense of power when helping others with tasks could outweigh his sense of hoarding, even if this results in others taking credit for his work.

Degree to which financial incentives would encourage respondents to share their knowledge/experience with others more openly

A total of 26 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that incentives such as bonuses would encourage their knowledge sharing in the organisation. However, 16 per cent strongly disagreed, implying that it would make no difference to their knowledge sharing. A total of 25 per cent disagreed somewhat, which means they could potentially be persuaded by incentives.

Age was found to be related to the frequency of respondents agreeing that incentives such as bonuses would increase their knowledge sharing. With a probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0016$, 23.81 per cent of respondents below the age of 25 strongly agreed that such incentives would encourage them to make use of knowledge sharing. Whilst 13.04 per cent of respondents between the ages of 26 and 39 strongly agreed with this statement, 42.50 per cent of respondents over the age of 40 years strongly agreed that incentives would encourage their knowledge-sharing capabilities.

It became evident that respondents below the age of 25 were driven by incentives to encourage their knowledge-sharing tendency. This is because most young adults are driven by money and benefits to reach and satisfy their numerous needs as quickly as possible, as well as to prove their independence. This figure decreased, however, among respondents between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-nine, which can be attributed to recognition being more important than any incentive. In other words, the power bestowed by knowledge is their competitive advantage, which they consider more essential.

Degree to which respondents felt they would benefit from a KM system in their organisation

A total of 53 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that they could benefit from a system that captures, stores, organises and manages knowledge. A total of 35 per cent

agreed somewhat that there was some benefit to them accruing from such a system and 12 per cent disagreed somewhat with this statement.

Factors found to be related to the frequency of respondents feeling they could benefit from a knowledge management system were as follows:

- Experience – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0073$. A total of 36.84 per cent of respondents with three years or less experience strongly agreed that they would benefit from a system that could capture, store, organise and manage the knowledge found in their organisation. This percentage steadily increased as the years of experience increased, with 64.10 per cent of respondents with between four and seven years' experience strongly agreeing with this statement. A total of 70 per cent of respondents with over eight years of experience strongly agreed.
- Home language – probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0001$. A total of 58.33 per cent of respondents speaking African languages strongly agreed that they would benefit from a knowledge management system in their organisation. A total of 64.71 per cent of English-speaking respondents felt strongly about this issue. Afrikaans-speaking respondents come a close second, with 60.53 per cent, followed by German-speaking people with 28.13 per cent.

It is interesting to note that respondents in the organisations perceived the benefits of KM systems as essential for the continued existence and excellence of the organisation. This tendency increased as years of experience increased, with 36 per cent of respondents with three or fewer years of experience strongly agreeing that they would benefit from a system that could capture, store, organise and manage knowledge in the organisation. This number rose significantly to 70 per cent among respondents with over eight years' experience strongly agreeing that they could benefit from such a system.

This question is linked to another question that was asked to test whether respondents felt their organisation would benefit from such a system.

Degree to which respondents felt their organisation would benefit from a system that could capture, store, organise and manage knowledge

A total of 72 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that their organisation could benefit from a knowledge management system, and 23 per cent only agreed somewhat. Only 5 per cent disagreed somewhat that the organisation could benefit from a knowledge management system.

Occupations with a probability of exceeding the norm: $p\text{-value} = 0.0004$ were found to be related to the frequency of respondents feeling that the organisation could benefit from a KM system. A total of 80 per cent of respondents in managerial positions strongly agreed that the organisation could benefit from a KM system. A total of 65.57 per cent of technology-based respondents strongly agreed to this, and 91.67 per cent of respondents in administrative positions strongly agreed that the organisation would benefit from a knowledge-sharing system.

Managers are more likely to strongly agree that the organisation would benefit from a KM system that would capture, store, organise and manage knowledge, a very important asset and source of competitive advantage to the organisation. People occupying technology-based and administrative positions also strongly agreed.

Conclusion

In this paper it is argued that in multidimensional and diversified settings, especially where the roles of dominance of one culture over another are reversed, factors that hinder the successful implementation of a knowledge-sharing culture take on new dimensions. Literature suggests that individuals who received education with a predominantly Western (Euro-centric) philosophy are less likely to share knowledge. In contrast Asian and African cultures are perceived to embrace group work, sharing and teamwork. This study in a sense corroborates the above-mentioned line of reasoning. More so than in homogenised environments, language issues present a huge deterrent to effective transfer of knowledge, with minorities finding it difficult to convey knowledge to majority speakers. The education a person receives also has a direct impact on the likelihood that

an individual will share knowledge. However, in this study it was also found that when African individuals (black and white) received schooling from within predominantly western philosophical perspectives, they are influenced by western culture to such an extent that they also become reluctant to share knowledge. Of interest is the fact that (unlike their European counterparts) they do not have a problem with sharing expertise, but resent asking for and/or using the expertise of others – something western cultures do not have a problem with. Findings therefore suggest that when one culture dominates another culture (or cultures), especially where the dominance occurred over a prolonged period of time, deep-seated resentment (over that enforced culture) is stamped on the cultural perceptions of the individuals involved. African individuals (black and white), rather than revealing a “sharing inclination”, display a sense of power in knowledge sharing. This power play is prolonged long after “liberation” when former oppressors use knowledge to retain power (opposing policies such as affirmative action), and the formerly oppressed use knowledge to gain power. Current literature (as far as cultural issues are concerned) is largely neglecting to acknowledge this phenomenon. Knowledge sharing in multidimensional cultures where individuals from different cultures were exposed to past political and cultural turmoil, and/or present empowerment policies such as employment equity are being implemented, is taking on a new dimension, one in which knowledge becomes power – the power to prove worth.

Limitations and applicability of the study

The main purpose of this study is to spark interest in an often neglected, but still extremely important topic – knowledge sharing in extremely diversified settings. A limitation of the study is that it was limited to only one organisation, within one industry, within only the South African scenario. Nonetheless, the results meet the demands of qualitative research in providing an understanding within a particular context. Due to the diversity of the organisation under scrutiny, the findings, deductions and conclusions reached highlight important facts and findings. These findings are applicable to organisations bent upon discovering answers to questions surrounding the challenge of managing knowledge in extremely dynamic and multicultural environments. However, further and extensive research is desperately needed - research that should not only strive

to substantiate or refute claims made in this paper but, more importantly, help to find solutions to many of the issues identified in it.

Owing to cultural differences, problems surrounding diversity in Knowledge Management may never be solved, but a long-term development plan to solve issues such as language barriers, discrimination and individual-based educational systems might prove to be quite valuable in the continued quest to manage knowledge successfully.

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