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In Praise of Cultural Bias

Information and knowledge management models that exclude the influence of national and regional culture seriously undercut their potential effectiveness.

DAVID J. PAULEEN AND PETER MURPHY

Historically, the world's wealthiest and most influential economies have developed on the basis of strong regional and national cultural biases. In the 19th century, for instance, the United States established itself as a first-rate industrial power by developing the "American system of manufacture" based on standardized and interchangeable parts. In the first half of the 20th century, U.S. manufacturing practices were further honed in Detroit and widely adopted modern office systems were developed in Chicago. Later, U.S. post-industrial giants clustered on the West Coast, where the distinctive flavors of San Francisco and Seattle shaped their successful cognitive and technical style. Throughout the world, all business, innovation and even cognition are based on localized cultural context. This doesn't mean they have no value in the global marketplace. Quite the contrary: Cultural idiosyncrasy is a spur for global innovation.

It is curious, then, that the information industry steamrolls ahead, paying relatively little attention to the implications of national and regional culture. All information systems, from databases to expert systems, including decision and executive support systems, communication and collaboration systems, contain built-in cultural biases. There's nothing worth doing that doesn't have a bias. New biases generate new breakthroughs. Yet, Western analytical assumptions about information and knowledge and their management currently dominate both information and knowledge management (IKM) research and development.

Culture Antecedents of IKM

The relationship between region and culture and information and knowledge is subtle and sometimes perplexing. Knowledge is social in nature. Drawing from psychology and cultural history, researchers have argued that the considerable social differences that exist among cultures affect "the ways by which people know the world," in the words of University of Michigan psychology professor Richard E. Nisbett. Culture affects the very concept of knowledge — what counts as knowledge in the first place and the degree of certainty ascribed to it. Culture also affects the cognitive process itself. As David Rooney of the University of Queensland Business School has contended, "Insofar as ideas, theories and beliefs form a shared phenomenological background in which people think and act, this context is decidedly cultural."

Consider how the cultural differences between the ancient Greek and Chinese societies imbued each with a fundamentally different understanding and application of information and knowledge. The Greeks espoused the notions of personal agency, resulting in the categorization of objects and events, governing rules and causal models — all for the purpose of systematic description, prediction and explanation. Consequently, Western tradition defines a knowledgeable person as one who can understand and articulate, particularly in writing, the underlying causes of events.

In contrast, the Chinese culture developed around a strong sense of *collective* agency and reciprocal social obligation, which included the wider physical and metaphysical environment. In this way of thinking, events are not causally, but *correlatively,* related. That is, actions and events are not produced linearly, but are the result of resonance and harmonization within a given system. As a result, the Chinese did not develop immutable laws of nature, but instead relied on intuition and empiricism. Learning and knowing came through direct, sustained experimental practice: "The invisible, the tacit, the spoken and the implied are held in higher esteem … than the visible, explicit, the written and the articulate," writes University of St. Andrews professor of management Robert Chia.

Nisbett categorizes the cognitive process favored

by the ancient Chinese as holistic and that of the Greeks, analytic. Holistic thought involves an orientation to the "context or field as a whole, including in particular the relationship between a focal object and the field and a preference for explaining and predicting events on the basis of existing relationships. Analytic thought is defined as detaching the object from its context, a tendency to focus on attributes of the object, to assign it to categories and a preference for using rules about the categories to explain and predict the object's behavior."

Any global enterprise must accommodate and, in fact, exploit alternate ways of conceptualizing problems, creating strategies and making decisions.

Over recent years, clinical and field experiments have demonstrated that cultural differences in cognition continue to be prevalent in today's society. It has been shown, for instance, that differing business attitudes around the globe are based upon underlying metaphysical assumptions, as well as the locally prevailing concept of information and knowledge and its relationship to decision making and action. It follows that any global enterprise must accommodate and, in fact, exploit alternate ways of conceptualizing problems, creating strategies and making decisions. That argument, Chia has suggested, clearly includes the management of information and knowledge: "The current preoccupation with explicit knowledge creation and management may need to be tempered by an equally important emphasis on direct experimental action as a valuable source of meaning, innovation, productivity and enhanced performance." Indeed, study of the cognitive psychology of creativity shows that the highest levels of innovation come from tacit, often visual, cognition and not from verbalized analytical reasoning.

Practical Implications

If this all sounds academic, consider that it can be easily argued that Japan rose to world manufacturing prominence in large part because it successfully combined two different culturally based perceptions: a Western concept of knowledge and an Eastern concept of art. Japan's production lines turned out goods that drew on the tacit assumptions of centuries of local aesthetics, allowing them to find wide acceptance in the world market.

Information and knowledge management models that exclude the influence of national and regional culture seriously undercut their potential effectiveness, particularly in global applications. If history is any guide, these cultural influences are reservoirs from which powerful new ideas for practical and theoretical IKM will emerge — ranging from how information and knowledge is classified, processed and retrieved (search engines, decision support systems, intranets and portals, for example) to how information and knowledge is shared and used in collaborative systems (Lotus Notes, communities of practice and so on) to how knowledge workers are managed (collaborative spaces, reward and recognition). In this sense, regional and national culture can be considered the crucial context in which IKM is embedded.

The recent lack of breakthroughs in information systems sends a strong signal that current analytical styles have become tired and worn. Successful innovation must come from the application of new cognitive styles, but so far that does not seem to be happening to any great degree. David Timothy, director of training and business development at Berlitz Cross Cultural, says that designers and engineers of information technology systems have not learned much from cultural variation in the understanding of information and knowledge. He points to Internet search companies, whose provision of linguistic alternatives to English is the extent of their efforts in leveraging cultural differences.

This implies that there are huge markets, such as China and India, which would likely welcome information systems that complement the tacit understandings of their cultures. As both economies continue to grow, it is only a matter of time before those countries themselves spark the next wave of information innovation.

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