



Culture and information: odd bedfellows?

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Is it at all possible to find any more difficult words to define than the two I had chosen to put into this issue's title? And yet these two are present in abundance in today's media: multiculturalism, cross-cultural issues, diversity in the workplace, managing across cultural boundaries, information age, information society and economy, but also lack of freedom of access to information, and an information gap threatening to leave those less lucky on the peripheries of the information superhighway, fears of disappearing cultures not being adequately documented or of oral cultures not having an equal access to services (now based on information technology) because of lack of written language – all genuine and valid issues discussed at conferences, seminars and workshops.

I recollect many years ago, when I used to work in a North African country, that there was a Ministry of Information (read propaganda). As the Western criticism of totalitarian regimes became louder, the ministry became that of Information and Culture. Then of Culture only! Somewhere the information disappeared, although the totalitarianism of its staff remained. Many years later, a few civil wars, a few genocides, and there is very little left of the culture as well.

What does it have to do with me, an information scientist, you may ask? We deal with dry data, with indices and taxonomies, with databases and metadata schemata. Or do we? If we think for a moment we might remember a few miss-judgements, a few more frustrations based on an assumption that other information scientists perceive importance, relevance, context, etc. like us, when obviously they do not. We may remember an intranet that cost us a lot but was never used, or a colleague somewhere else in the world who does not respond to e-mails as often as they should, or an overseas funding that didn't get through because our proposal wasn't 'right' for the funding institution.

The list could go on until, as the Australians would say, 'the cows come home'. As both a translator and an information manager, I have been mesmerized for years by the dependency of information generation, dissemination and organization that depend on the cultural perceptions of those involved. Any knowledge manager will agree with me – not only different cultures, but also sub-cultures and alter-cultures have a great impact on knowledge markets within an organization.

Globalization is pushing us towards a unified 'global village' in which everyone has McDonald's for lunch. Ideally, all governance systems would be identical, so that financial, business and organizational information need not be re-interpreted. As the teething pains of a united Europe are showing, things are not that easy in practice. Language, religion, class, gender, ethnicity all combine to make a multicultural dream a consultant's nightmare. As if this was not enough, we now have information media that none of our predecessors could even dream of. Satellites, the Internet, electronic commerce and digitalization are all culturally bound and affected, and all tools for producing, dissemination or organization of

information.

Effective management of information and related information technology is critically important to the success and survival of our organizations. In this global information society where information travels through cyberspace without the constraints of time, distance, and speed this criticality arises from the: increasing dependence on information and the systems that deliver this information (Lainhart 2000).

After years of studying Eastern versus Western cultures to determine behaviour, researchers started examining the diversity of the many cultures that shape the modern world and its future (Voich and Stepina, 1994). Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv and Sanders (1990) were among the first to empirically demonstrate that, in spite of global communications and the increased interdependence of world markets, distinctive cultural differences still exist among nations. Between that research and 2004, a few more ethnically (and therefore culturally distinct) entities came into being. It was maintained that any significant cultural homogenization of the world population is unarguable (Ferraro 1990). This, to an extent, is still very true. Most of the organizational research studies advocating convergence focused on macro level issues such as the structure and technology of organizations, while the studies that concluded for divergence focused on micro level issues such as the behavior of people within organizations (Adler 1986). As organizations worldwide are becoming increasingly similar, the people within these same organizations are maintaining culturally unique behaviour. The effect this has on managing information and knowledge is enormous.

In the coming issues we will look into various aspects of information management and the vagaries of culture. I do not promise certainty, only interesting journeys into the world of diversity, ideas to ponder and experiments to perform. If we all come out of this experience a bit befuddled and a bit astonished, we can at least say that we have tried to understand. Topics addressed will include cross-cultural information management, multi-lingual information systems, multiculturalism in information provision; gender and class effects on information accession, the digital gap, cultural issues in introduction of ITC, managing knowledge in culturally diverse workplaces, information and globalization, information monopolies and many more.

Bookshelf

Only a few preliminary titles will be presented this time as a foretaste of better things to come:

Gesteland, R.R. 1996. *Cross-cultural business behavior*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Handelshøjskolens Forlag (Copenhagen Business School Press).

Sherif, K. 2003. *Managing globally with information technology*. Harrisburg, PA: Idea Group Publishing.

Roy, A., Walters, P.G.P. and Luk, S.T.K. 2001. Chinese puzzles and paradoxes: conducting business research in China. *Journal of Business Research* 52(2):203-210.

Trompenaars, F. and Hampden-Turner. 1998. *Riding the waves of culture: understanding cultural diversity in global business*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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Adler, N. 1986. *International Dimensions Of Organizational Behavior*. Boston, MA: Kent Publishing Company.

Ferraro, G.P. 1990. *The cultural dimension of international business*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D.D. and Sanders, G. 1990. Measuring organizational cultures: a qualitative and quantitative study across twenty cases. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 35:286-316.

Lainhart, J.W. 2000. CobiT: a methodology for managing and controlling information and information technology risks and vulnerabilities. *Journal of Information Systems* (Supplement) 14:21-25.

Voich, D. and Stepina, L.P. 1994. *Cross-cultural analysis of values and politics: economic issues*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

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