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A STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN VIETNAMESE ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

Knowledge sharing is very much a sign for the atmosphere of social interactions in the organizations, it depends on the quality of the conversation, formally or informally. In other words, for more effective knowledge sharing, communication competence is required in order to have appropriate conversation. During the past decades, most theories of communication competence have been developed on the basis of "western" conceptualization. This empirical research is conducted in order to study the organizational communication competence in a non-western country, Vietnam, and the effect of such competence to the employees' knowledge sharing behavior respectively. Base on the data collected from 11 organizations, the effects of three culture dimensions, namely individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance to the communication competence were statistically analyzed; then, stemming from the certain level of communication competence, the behavior of organizational members towards knowledge sharing was explained.

Keywords: Knowledge Sharing, Communication Competence, National Culture, Power Distance Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance

Introduction

Knowledge is seen as the most strategically important resource (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) for solving problems, creating core competences, and initiating new situation for both individual and organizations (Yozgat, 1998). In the past decade, we have witnessed an explosion of approaches to knowledge management. And organizations requires managing several processes of knowledge (Probst et al, 2000) such as creation, storage, sharing, and evaluating. Among those processes, sharing is crucial for knowledge organizations. As knowledge sharing is very much a sign for the atmosphere of social interactions in the organizations, it requires individuals to share what they know.

However, knowledge sharing does not come easy; in fact, there are inherent barriers to knowledge sharing (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). It is said that knowledge transfer between individuals in organizations requires communication (Sveiby, 2001). Van den Hooff and de Ridder (1998) stated that knowledge sharing is a form of communication. Any knowledge sharing process consists of two parts: donating and collecting. Knowledge donating can be defined as "communicating to others what one's personal intellectual capital", whereas knowledge collecting is defined as "consulting colleagues in order to get them share their intellectual capital".

Schramm (1955) defined communication at its simplest level as "the process of establishing a commonness or oneness of thought between a sender and receiver." Communication helps create shared meaning, the norms, values and culture of the organization (Wiesenfeld et al, 1998). In other words, for more effective knowledge sharing, communication competence is required in order to have appropriate conversation.

However, cultural factors have long been known to influence the communication and success of organizations (Doz & Hamel, 1998). As Cooley and Roach (1984) argued, "communication behaviors that are the reflection of an individual's competence are culturally specific and, hence, bound by the culture in which they are acted out. As a result, behaviors that are understood as a reflection of competence in one culture are not necessarily understood as competent in another".

There are many facets of culture, such as organizational culture, professional culture and national culture. In our research we choose to focus on national culture. National culture is defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguished the members of one human group from another" (Hofstede, 1980). In other words, the aforementioned issues are thoroughly discussed in the knowledge sharing and communication competence literatures. Yet, an issue that has been under-explored is how individual's communication competence is shaped by different national culture characteristics and how communication competence can explain the knowledge sharing behavior distinction among individuals.

In filling such gap, this study engages in an examination of Vietnam, in term of national cultural characteristics so as to analyze the scale of communication competence of Vietnamese organizational employees, and draw the possibility of knowledge sharing among them. Thus the two

timely questions were addressed as follows:
(1) How does national culture affect to the organizational employees' communication competence?
(2) What is the relationship between communication competence and knowledge sharing?

Literature Reviews

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge management is defined as "a systematic, holistic and organizationally specified process for acquiring, organizing, and communicating both tacit and explicit knowledge of employees so that other employees may make use of it to be more effective and productive in their work" (Alavi & Leidner, 1999). Sharing knowledge among organizational members is not a new phenomenon. Employees always to some extent, has been, and is, seeking to cover their lack of knowledge by asking colleagues, getting training from more experienced colleagues, receiving supervision from their superiors, etc.

Recent research on knowledge sharing has emphasized the collective character of knowledge emerging from interaction and dialogue among individuals (Cabrea & Cabrea, 2002). According to Hendriks (1999) knowledge sharing was seen to be a force of provideing a link between individual knowledge workers and the level of the organization, where knowledge and expertise attains its economic and competitive value. Van de Hooff and de Ridder (2004) presented a vision: "…knowledge sharing is the process where individuals mutually exchange their tacit (implicit) and explicit knowledge and jointly create new knowledge". Medium through which knowledge is transferred has an impact on the attitude towards knowledge sharing (Abdus, 2005). Knowledge sharing, as a result, is considered a form of communication. (Van den Hoff & de Ridder, 2004). Any knowledge sharing contains two parts - donating and collecting. Knowledge donating can be defined as "communicating to others what one's personal intellectual capital".

In general, knowledge sharing presumes a two-way relation between at least two parties (i.e. knowing subjects), of which one communicates knowledge either consciously or not, and the other party should be able to perceive knowledge expressions and make sense of them. This process differs from information sharing, which is a one-way act referring to the extent of communicating critical, often proprietary information to the another party (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). In other words, knowledge sharing depends on the quality of conversation, formally or informally (Davenport & Prusach, 1998). In case of

accessing innovative thinking, building trust and facilitating experience sharing, an expressive communication in formal setting is necessary, contrary to the instrumental communication that is necessary for accomplishing task related immediate organizational goals (Thomas et al, 2001). Thus, it can be claimed that competent communicators are needed at all organizational levels (Shockley & Zalabak, 2001).

H1: Communication competence has a positive effect on knowledge sharing.

Communication Competence

Communication is one of the most critical elements of any organization's functioning. Myers and Myers (1982) defined organizational communication as "the central binding force that permits coordination among people and thus allows for organized behaviour". Moreover the encoder and the decoder communicates with each other through a channel, within a specific environment - the force which enables or disables the communication process, is the physical, social and emotional context that the communication takes place in. That is to say, effective communication involves the choice of the best communications channel for a specific purpose, the technical knowledge to use the channel appropriately, and the presentation of information in an appropriate manner for the target audience, and the ability to understand messages and responses received from others (Thomson, 2007).

Some researchers employing this approach believe that the way to study organizational communication competence is to understand self and role responsibilities within the organization through examinations of individual differences among organizational members. Particularly, they operationalize competence in terms of an individual's cognitive complexity, perspective talking, empathy, persuasive ability, and selfmonitoring (Zorn & Violanti, 1996). During the past two decades, most theories of communication competence have been developed on the basis of "western" conceptualizations (Park, 1985) of "white, middle-class" Americans (Cooley & Roach, 1984). Although some competence researchers have considered cultural factors in their work (Collier, 1988, 1989), most have focused on relationships between culture and interpersonal communication competence generally, and not on culture and communication competence in organizations in particular.

Cooley and Roach (1984) argued, "communication behaviors that are thereflection of an individual's competence are culturally specific and, hence, bound by the culture in which they are acted out. As a result, behaviors that are understood

as a reflection of competence in one culture are not necessarily understood as competent in another". Thus cultural differences may be a major factor affecting the characteristics of communication competence in different organizational and national culture (Zorn & Violanti, 1996). Since cultural variability is considered to be a major factor affecting the way that individuals in different national cultures communicate in the interpersonal, group (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Hofstede's dimensions are often employed by researchers when "international" or "national culture" issues are discussed within information system (in other fields Hofstede's name is nearly synonymous with national culture).

As discussed above, literature has a consistent agreement on the two aspects of communication competence: communication knowledge (knowledge of appropriate communication) and communication skills (ability to use that knowledge). In a study interested in determining the effects of cultural values on the communication practices of Thai business professionals.

Thus, this study admits that the communication skills aspect of communication competence theory in western culture is applicable in non-western culture. Afterwards, if communication competence is mentioned, then it will refer to the communication knowledge (the knowledge of appropriate communication patterns of conflict avoiding, showing respect, and using correct language). This determination will be further reviewed in the following sections, reflected to another circumstance, Vietnamese culture.
H2: Organizational members' communication competence will be affected by the national culture characteristics.

National Culture
According to Hofstede (1980), refers to "the collective programming of the mind which distinguished the members of one human group from another". In other words, members of a culture will have similar sets of preferences built into how they view the world (Hofstede, 1980). The Vietnamese culture can be described as large power distance (70), high collectivism (20), and weak uncertainty avoidance (Ralston et al., 1999). Indeed, studies on Vietnamese culture employing Hofstede's culture dimensions are scare. In this study, we choose to pursue further the study of Nguyen (2002), namely
"Organization culture in Vietnam", and the study of Truong and Nguyen (2002) about "Management Styles and Organizational Effectiveness in Vietnam". In their research, they gave people a very broad view about the national culture of

Vietnamese people in general, which latterly considered as a factor forming the organization culture in the Vietnamese Organizations.

Vietnamese people are said to have a capacity to grasp intuitively the emotional intricacies involved in any particular situation (Nguyen, 2002). Also referred by Nguyen (2002), the low individualistic characteristic of Vietnamese culture is also reflected in values associated with the Vietnamese kinship system. The parent-children relationship is viewed by the Vietnamese as basic to social life, and thus most Vietnamese retain very close ties with their families.

Normally, at least one child in a family assumes responsibility for aged parents. This culture facet also affects very much in the Vietnamese organizational characteristic. Moreover, because Vietnamese people tend to promote the cohesive tie strength between people, the superior-subordinate relationship is not limited within the organization; it is extended to the life outside the organizations as well. Nguyen (2002), and Truong and Nguyen (2002) characterized Vietnamese culture by large power distance. Many organizations in Vietnam are being developed based on the paternalistic; the superior's idea is the most priority. In making decision process, it is the superior's task to decide everything and communicate clear goal to the subordinates and the subordinates have to carry out orders without deviation.

Customarily, subordinates do not assertively challenge authority of their boss. Vietnamese superiors generally are not interested in consulting opinions from subordinates. Subordinates cannot demonstrate in public that they are more knowledgeable than their superiors but rather to save the face of the superior or make the superior look good. Observing the communicative behavior of the organizational employees, it is very easy to realize the tendency of pleasing the superior, gaining the superiors' sympathy, which is not based on the ability of task accomplishment but the special treatment. Besides, in communicating with the other management in the same or equivalent lines they has to be formal in order to show their politeness and prevent the others from feeling that they are underestimated. Mutual respect, face-saving, and politeness dominate all levels of the relationship among organizational members (Nguyen, 2002). Lastly, Vietnamese culture is shown to be weak uncertainty avoidance (Nguyen, 2002).

In comparison with Russia and China, an important similarity between Vietnam and these two countries is the lack of sufficient regulatory environments. According to Nguyen (2002), in

Vietnamese culture, people focus on the exceptionality of circumstances and make their decision based on acquaintances or lack of acquaintance with others. Rules are not as important as circumstance and personal relation. Thus, to Vietnamese, lying, cheating, stealing, by themselves have no positive or negative connotation: they could be bad or good depending on the situation in terms of the particulars of the situation and the people judging them. One important thing that needs to bear in mind in considering about weak uncertainty avoidance culture characteristics of Vietnamese is their way of applying pronouns in society, and especially in organizations. Vietnamese pronouns is very complicated, it changes in accordance to the conversation context as well as to the gender and relations between each participants (Nguyen & Do, 2005). However, in organizations, nowadays, in addressing oneself and the others, people tend to apply a very casual pronoun. For example, using anh/chi (male/female who is a little older than us) is very popular among organizational members instead of chu-bac/co-bac (male/female who is quite older than us).

By doing so, the relationship between the speaker and the listener will be shortened and the listener will feel younger (Nguyen, 2002).

H2a: Individualism has positive effect on communication competence.

H2b: Power distance has positive effect on communication competence.

H2c: Uncertainty avoidance has negative effect on communication competence.

Methodology

Research Model

The object of this study is to examine the relationship between knowledge sharing and communication competence, bases on the Vietnamese national culture dimensions resulted from Hofstede's (1980) study to explore the communication competence of organizational members, which latterly explains the knowledge sharing behavior. According to the literature review, this study builds a research framework as shown in Figure 1.

Sample Process and Data Analysis Methodology

To test and verify the research model, this study collected data by surveying a sample frame of 11 various organizations in Vietnamese organization with questionnaires. The measurement items for five constructs in the research model are listed in Table 1. A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure the items.
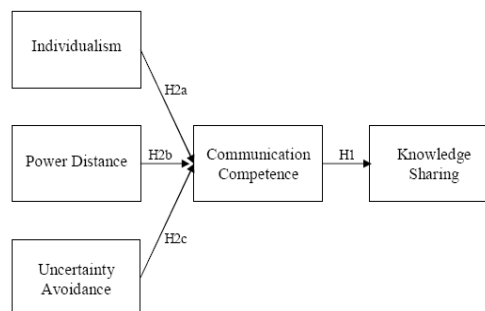

Figure 1 Research Framework

Table 1. The Instrument of 5 Constructs and Related Literature

Constructs	Related literature	Measurement items
Individualism	Sriussadaporn and Jablin (1999), Hofstede (1980), Sorod (1991)	3
Power distance	Sriussadaporn and Jablin (1999), Hofstede (1980), Sorod (1991)	4
Uncertainty avoidance	Sriussadaporn and Jablin (1999), Hofstede (1980), Sorod (1991)	3
Communication competence	Sharbrough et al. (2006)	5
Knowledge sharing	Abel et al. (2007)	4

The questionnaire was directly distributed over a two-week period to, thence, 149 out of 168 questionnaires were returned. With the data collected this study used SPSS 13.0 package is used for analyzing instrument.

In order to assess construct validity and identify the unique dimension of each construct, factor analysis with VARIMAX rotation was employed. After that, all factor loadings are greater than 0.5, an minimum level suggested by reference. In addition, to ensure good internal consistency of each constructs, this study used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of the constructs. The results showed all the Cronbach's alpha exceed 0.7.

Data Analysis and Results

In this study, linear regression was adopted to examine the relationships between independent variables and dependent variables to test our research hypotheses.

The relationship between organizational members' Communication Competence and their Knowledge Sharing behaviour was analysed using regression analysis. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Linear Regression Analysis for Testing H1

Construct	Standardized Coefficients β	t value	R^2	Adj-R^2	F value
Communication competence	0.754[***]	13.920	0.569	0.566	193.778[***]

Dependent variable: knowledge sharing
[***]p<0.001

Table 3 shows the multiple regression analysis for evaluate the relationship between the dimensions of national culture and communication competence.

Table 3 Linear Regression Analysis for Testing H2

Construct	Standardized Coefficients β	t value	VIF	R^2	Adj-R^2	F value
Individualism/ collectivism	0.195[***]	3.391	1.165			
Power distance	0.742[***]	14.693	1.189	0.689	0.683	107.107[***]
Uncertainty avoidance	-0.169[***]	-3.593	1.028			

Dependent variable: Communication Competence
[***]$p<0.001$

In this study, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS 13.0) was employed for measuring the properties of the scales. Based on these results, this study supposes to show the fitted model of "Effect of communication competence on knowledge sharing in organization" in the context of Vietnam. Figure 2 is derived from the research framework with beta coefficients filled.
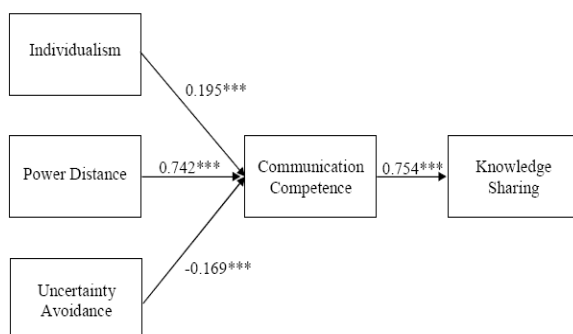

Figure 2 Path Coefficients for Research Model
(Path Significance ***$p<0.001$)

Conclusions

Research Finding

Among many antecedents of knowledge sharing, communication competence has drawn relatively less attention by researchers in this field. In IS domain, when studying knowledge sharing, researchers tend to see it in the lens of internet-based action, in which people interact with each other via computer and contribute their knowledge to a digital repository. However, as Lim et al. (2004) noted that the knowledge sharing attitudes were more evident in a face-to-face context rather than the electronic medium. Knowledge sharing as the result is really a form of communication, formal or informal.

Thus, for more effective knowledge sharing, sharer and receiver's communication competence is necessarily required. Such competence has long been demonstrated to be bound by national culture background of each individual. In the light of these issues, this study conduct an empirical study to examine whether communication competence really affects knowledge sharing and how it is shaped by the national culture characteristics. The result shows that the more competence communicators have, the more effective knowledge sharing among them.

This study, on the other hand, successfully reviews and extends the communication theory into a non-western country, Vietnam. More precisely, in a culture of large power distance, there are more status differences among people, respect for authority, and following to protocol; communicators tend to be more competent in order to have an appropriate conversation among people. Similarly, it reveals that the society of low individualism people (as known as high collectivism) will have more communication competence because they will express more social harmony, deference, and conflict avoidance.

In contrast, people of weak uncertainty avoidance will have less communication competence, because they feel freer and open in discussing with each other no matter what the rules and regulations say. There is little care about tactfulness, politeness, and correct form of address in conversation, which is very much related to communication competence. This study's result and conclusion, therefore, are consistent with the previous researches.

However, this study also found out that, of three cultural characteristics (individualism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance), power distance has the strongest influence on the communication competence. That is explained by the way the sample was chosen, 149 respondents are all organizational employees. And it is said that perceptions of power distance were largely influenced by organization climate and employees' value systems (Tan & Chong, 2003). Thus, the finding in this research, derived from the data analysis, is reasonable.

Research Implications

This study, among very few research papers about Vietnam's knowledge sharing literature, can be of useful for many Vietnamese organizations to apply in explaining the communication and knowledge sharing behavior of individuals. From this point, organizations can also figure out the approach to leverage the positive and eliminate the negative effect of culture background on their employees' communication competence.

Moreover, in today's globalization trend, there are increasingly more companies having business over national boundaries, which results in a diverse workforce environment. Understanding of communication competence pattern of each other would be effective in reducing conflict in intercultural communication, as well as reinforce and foster knowledge sharing action among organizational members, which afterwards leads to success.

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