

Cultural Influences on the Adoption of Knowledge Orientated HRM Practices

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The aim of the paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the factors that affect the approaches adopted by organizations when managing their knowledge. The main focus is on Human Resource Management (HRM) practices that contribute to a more effective knowledge acquisition, creation, dissemination and utilisation, as well as on cultural characteristics of society that affect the implementation of such practices. The author deals with the question from both the theoretical and the empirical perspective. Because of the topicality of the theme and its practical implications for management, the paper should interest academics, government representatives, top managers, and organizational practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary technological, political, and economic developments show an increased importance of intangible resources, and a decreased importance of material ones. Resources that are valuable, rare and difficult to replicate must form the basis of the business processes if a firm is to outperform its competitors and create value (Barney 1991). Academics and practitioners recognise that knowledge is one of such critical organisational resources (Teece et al. 1997). The ability to increase and effectively employ knowledge is not only expected to create the major source of competitive advantage in the future, but it is also seen as a prerequisite for the survival of today's organisations (Lähtenmäki et al. 2001). Consequently, people and the way they are managed are becoming increasingly important (Konrad and Papalexandris 2004), and organisations are trying to implement practices that contribute to an effective acquisition, creation, dissemination and utilisation of knowledge. These trends are reflected in the adoption of 'high-commitment', 'high-involvement' or 'high-performance' human resource practices (Huselid 1995; Wood and de Menzes 1998) that support the creation and development of highly qualified people who are motivated and committed to the organisation. Following the gurus of the learning organisation

and knowledge management companies are trying to implement organisational structures, policies and practices that stimulate vertical and horizontal communication and participation. Although knowledge is created and utilised by individuals, the interaction between individuals plays a critical role in developing these ideas and transforming individual knowledge into organisational knowledge (Fister 2004; Nonaka 1994; Senge 1990).

Human resource management practices can be considered as institutionalised routines that are developed in the process of coping with problems of external adaptation and internal integration (Konrad and Papalexandris 2004). The question that arises is what factors facilitate or hinder the development and implementation of HRM practices. The literature gives some possible answers, one of them is societal culture (Brown and Starkey 2000; Ferris et al. 1998; Kopelman et al. 1990).

Societal Culture

Generally speaking, culture is used by social scientists to refer to a set of parameters of collectives that differentiate the collectives from each other in meaningful ways. The specific criteria used to differentiate cultures usually depend on the preferences of the investigator and the issues under investigation, and tend to reflect the discipline of the investigator. Following House et al. (2002) culture will be defined as shared motives, value, beliefs, identities, and interpretations of meanings that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations. Culture manifests itself in many different ways. On the concrete level the culture is expressed in material artefacts, behaviours, policies and practices, while on the abstract level in values, motives, and basic assumptions (Hofstede 1997; Schein 1985). The so-called 'onion' models of culture assume that more concrete, conscious and behavioural elements of culture represent the vehicles for transmission of less tangible and more subjective facets of culture (Rousseau 1990, 157).

Literature offers several theoretical dimensions that represent the universal attributes of cultures and fundamental human problems and questions to which different societies give different solutions or answers. The most popular and frequently cited are probably Hofstede's four cultural dimensions. In this study we will use nine cultural dimensions that were identified in the international research project GLOBE (House et al. 2002).

- *Performance orientation* is the extent to which the society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.
- *Future orientation* is the degree to which individuals in societies engage in future-oriented behaviours such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification.
- *Human orientation* is the degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others.
- *Assertiveness* is the degree to which individuals in the societies are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships. This dimension is part of Hofstede's (1980) masculinity dimension.
- *Institutional collectivism* reflects the degree to which societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action.
- *Family collectivism* is the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organisations and families.
- *Gender egalitarianism* is the extent to which the society minimises gender role differences.
- *Power distance* is the degree to which members of the society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared. This dimension reflects Hofstede's (1980) power distance construct.
- *Uncertainty avoidance* is the extent to which members of the society strive to avoid uncertainty by reliance on social norms, rituals, and bureaucratic practices to alleviate the unpredictability of future events and anxiety related to it. This dimension reflects Hofstede's (1980) uncertainty avoidance construct.

The Role of Culture in the Adoption and Effectiveness of HRM Practices

The paper focuses on the role of societal culture in the application of human resource practices that help organisations to manage their knowledge more effectively. The hypothesis that societal culture has an impact on HRM practices makes sense from several perspectives.

From the individual perspective, societal culture determines mental frameworks or schemes for perceiving, thinking, evaluating, feeling, and behaving in different situations and in relation to different problems. Societal influences on individuals are most strong in the childhood

TABLE 1 Consequences of national culture for organisations

Cultural dimension	Consequences for organisations
Power distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater centralisation • Tall organisation pyramids • Large proportion of supervisory personnel • Low qualification of lower strata
Uncertainty avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers are more task oriented and less willing to take individual and risky decisions • Less ambitious employees • More ritual behaviour
Individualism (low collectivism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations are not expected to look after employees from cradle to grave • Calculative commitment of employees • Policies and practices allow for individual initiative • Promotion of people from inside and outside, dependent of market value • Managers try to be up-to-date and endorse modern management ideas
Masculinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young men are expected to make a career • Fewer women in more qualified and better-paid jobs • Higher job stress • More industrial conflicts

Source: Hofstede 1997.

(Rokeach 1973). Nevertheless, the effects of the early socialisation remain relatively stable in life. Unlike constructs that are more peripheral to an individual (e.g. attitudes, opinions), values are relatively permanent, although capable of being changed under certain circumstances (Hofstede, Bond and Luk 1993; Meglino and Ravlin 1998). With employment individuals 'bring' assimilated societal influences in the workplace, that determine their perceptions of organisational practices and general modes of behaviour, and so the level of acceptance and effectiveness of management initiatives (Hofstede 1997).

The impact of societal culture on HRM practices makes sense also from cross-cultural dissimilarities in institutional structures that represent manifestations of the societal culture (Hofstede 1980, 22). Institutional structures, such as legal rules and political conditions, are likely to affect the application of new management prescriptions, regardless of the fact that management theories are rapidly disseminating across national borders (Mendonca and Kanungo 1994). This is due to the fact that HRM practices are subject to idiosyncratic sets of national regula-

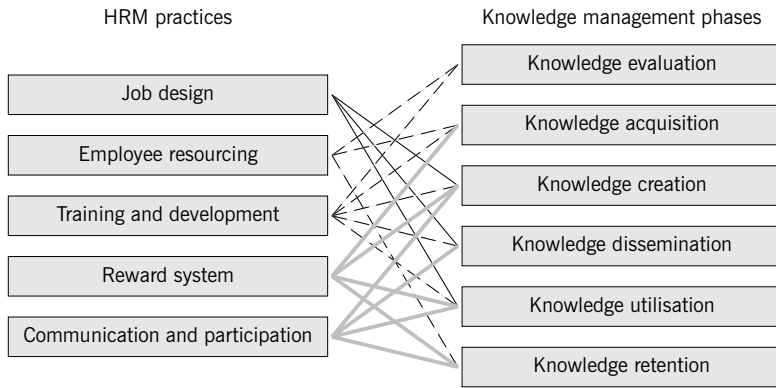


FIGURE 1 The role of human resource management practices in the process of knowledge management

tions (Kopelman et al. 1990) as well as sensitive to the scrutiny of labour unions whose strength and attitudes toward management vary. Moreover, different types of HRM practices may be determined to a considerable degree by the imperative of maintaining external legitimacy through adherence to institutional structures, rules, and norms at the national level, and may so vary as a result of dissimilar national contexts (Konrad and Papalexandris 2004).

In the last two decades several theories have been developed and empirically tested with the aim of explaining the impact of societal or national culture characteristics on the application and effectiveness of HRM practices (Ferris et al. 1998; House et al. 2002; Kopelman et al. 1990; Mendonca and Kanungo 1994). Hofstede (1997) makes a detailed description of the consequences of national culture characteristics for organisational structure, policies, and practices. Power distance is the cultural attribute that mainly affects the level of centralisation (concentration of authority), uncertainty avoidance dimension affects the level of structuring of activities in organisations (including standardisation, specialisation, and formalisation), collectivism/individualism affects the nature of the exchange relationship between the employee and the employer (calculative or emotional). The masculinity dimension determines the level of gender egalitarianism in organisations and the level of importance that the work has for employees.

Aycan et al. (2000) find in a cross-cultural study, carried out in 10 countries, that cultural dimensions such as paternalism, power distance, and loyalty toward community (institutional collectivism) predicted

HRM practices in the area of job design, supervision, and reward allocation. Based on the results of two international projects GLOBE and CRANET, Konrad and Papalexandris (2004) found that characteristics of societal culture are useful for a critical analysis of HRM practices used to foster organisational learning.

This study investigates the role of societal culture in the adoption of knowledge management oriented human resource practices. Following the literature review (Alavi and Leidner 2001) we define KM as a process of organisational knowledge evaluation, creation, acquisition, dissemination, utilisation, and retention. The selection of practices that should contribute to a better knowledge management process is based on the literature about knowledge management and HRM practices (Armstrong 1993).

METHOD

Sample

The study used the data from a research project done in the years 2003 and 2004. The sample consisted of 824 employees from 20 Slovenian private and public organisations:

- 429 men and 395 women;
- 39 occupying top management positions, 98 high management and 149 middle management positions, 220 expert workers, and 318 manual workers.

Measures

Societal culture was measured with the societal practices questionnaire designed, adapted for the Slovenian population, and tested in the GLOBE project (House et al. 2002). The questionnaire included 38 items that represent nine cultural dimensions described in the introduction of the paper. These are: performance orientation, future orientation, assertiveness, institutional collectivism, family collectivism, gender egalitarianism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. The questionnaire included two types of scales:

- A 7-point semantic differential. An example of such item is: 'Members of our society are mainly: very aggressive (1) to not at all aggressive (7).'
- A 7-point agreement scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). An example of such item is: 'In our society followers are expected to obey their leaders without questions.'

- Psychometric characteristics of nine scales were analysed by House et al. (2004). The reliabilities of scales (Cronbach alphas) were in the range between .67 and .88.

The questionnaire of *human resource management practices* included 25 practices from five theoretical activity areas of human resource management (Armstrong 1993): job design, employee resourcing, training and development, reward management, communication and employee participation. Respondents were asked to evaluate if a certain practice is adopted in their organisation or not (1 – no, 2 – I don't know, 3 – yes).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pearson correlation coefficients between individual level indicators of selected HRM practices and individual perception of societal culture are presented in table 2. From table 2 we see that a number of correlations reach statistical significance which confirm the general expectation about the relationship between HRM practices and perceptions of societal culture.

From the result in table 2 we can predict the following impact of societal culture on the level of design of HRM practices oriented toward a systematic and more effective knowledge management:

1. Job design is a micro organisational element through which organisations can stimulate knowledge creation, dissemination and utilisation. Task characteristics, such as autonomy, and variety and micro organisational units, such as teams or groups, 1) give freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out, 2) give the employee the possibility to perform different tasks, and use different skills, and 3) foster the interaction and communication that are a necessary element of knowledge management (Nonaka 1994). Our results show that job design that gives to the employee autonomy and the possibility to use different skills and talents is expected to be more often present in countries with low power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, and high humane, future and performance orientation. Team work should be more often present in more social responsible countries (humane orientation).

2. Employee resourcing includes practices of employee forecasting, recruitment and selection. HR planning is a complex process that requires the evaluation of knowledge that the organisation already possesses, its current and future knowledge needs and the analysis about the possibilities to acquire the needed skills and knowledge from the outside. Through a recruitment and selection process, the organisation tries to

TABLE 2. Intercorrelations between indicators of knowledge oriented human resource practices and dimensions of societal culture

HRM practices	Dimensions of societal culture								
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<i>Job design</i>									
Team work	-.04	.01	.03	.14**	.06	.04	.01	.02	.04
Autonomy	-.05	-.16**	.07	.17**	.15**	.08*	-.02	.12**	.15**
Task variety	.06	-.09*	.01	.15**	.14**	.04	.04	.11**	.19**
<i>Employee resourcing</i>									
HR planning	-.07	-.03	-.03	.11**	.08*	-.00	.05	.03	.08*
Internal advertisement	-.02	-.09**	.04	.13**	.13**	.01	.05	.10**	.17**
External advertisement	.04	-.01	.06	.07*	.07*	.05	.03	.06	.09*
Interviews	-.02	.02	.08*	.07*	.04	-.02	.06	-.01	.03
Psychometric tests	-.02	-.07	-.06	.14**	.10**	.06	.03	.05	.11**
Recommendations	.04	-.04	.07	.05	.05	.00	.05	.06	.11**
<i>Training and development</i>									
Training needs analysis	-.05	-.05	-.00	.18**	.09*	.05	.04	.07*	.08*
Training for all employees	-.06	-.09**	.05	.19**	.07*	.06	.04	.08*	.08*
Assessing training effectiveness	-.03	-.13**	-.01	.17**	.14**	.01	.05	.13**	.14**

Performance management system	-.00	-.14**	.02	.15**	.08*	.05	.06	.10**	.14**
Succession management	.05	-.10**	.04	.15**	.13**	.07*	.03	.10**	.16**
Vertical and horizontal career paths	-.00	-.10**	.05	.11**	.12**	-.01	.02	.07*	.17**
<i>Reward management</i>									
Pay – for individual performance	.05	-.11**	.02	.13**	.10**	.04	.07	.15**	.19**
Pay – for group performance	-.03	-.17**	.01	.21**	.19**	.11**	.03	.16**	.19**
Rewards for acquired knowledge, skills or education	.00	-.20**	.02	.17**	.14**	.06	-.02	.14**	.23**
Rewards for innovations, improvements	.00	-.10**	.01	.21**	.19**	.05	.03	.09**	.12**
Non-financial rewards	.03	-.15**	.01	.18**	.06	.10**	.01	.06	.10**
Clear criteria for allocation of rewards	.03	-.08*	-.01	.11**	.07*	.03	.07	.08*	.14**
<i>Communication and participation</i>									
Regular informing about business results and future plans	-.03	-.08*	.00	.14**	.06	.02	.04	.04	.12**
Formal paths for vertical upward communication	-.01	-.11**	.02	.14**	.09*	.05	.02	.07*	.11**
Organisational magazines, newsletters or bulletins	.05	-.10**	-.00	.14**	.08*	.04	.02	.07*	.14**
Regular team briefings	-.01	-.12**	.04	.18**	.12**	.05	.08*	.09*	.14**

Note: Column headings as follows: (1) Assertiveness; (2) power distance; (3) gender egalitarianism; (4) humane orientation; (5) uncertainty avoidance; (6) family collectivism; (7) institutional collectivism; (8) future orientation; and (9) performance orientation. N = 824; * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

obtain the number and the type of people it needs. Through a proper selection of candidates the organisation increases the possibilities to retain highly motivated and committed employees. The practice of HR planning is connected with employee perceptions of humane and performance oriented society, that tries to alleviate the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the future by reliance on social norms, rituals, and bureaucratic practices (planning is one of such practices). Recruitment and selection practices are also dependent on societal culture, especially the level of uncertainty avoidance, performance orientation and humane orientation. The more the society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence, the more it is oriented toward people, their well-being and uncertainty avoiding, the greater the probability that methods such as internal and external advertisement, employment agencies, psychometric tests, and recommendations will be used for recruiting and selecting candidates. In countries with high power distance, organisations will less often use internal advertisement for selecting candidates, i. e. search for knowledge and skills inside the organisation. Such practice would pose a threat for those that are in high positions (their position could be occupied by someone from lower positions) and for those that are in lower positions (higher position would give them discretion and responsibility for decisions and action). Other cultural characteristics do not have important effects on HRM practices of recruitment and selection.

3. The results indicate that societal culture can have an impact also on performance of practices in the area of training and development. Four characteristics of societal culture have the greatest effects on training and development practices: humane, future and performance orientation, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance. In future oriented, performance demanding, and uncertain countries which in the same time perceive people as their most important resource, the needs for training are more often analysed, all levels of employees are included in training programmes, and training effectiveness is assessed. In countries with high power distance, where members of the society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared, little attention is put on training and development of employees. Similar results show a correlation between societal cultural dimensions and human resource development practices such as: horizontal and vertical career opportunities, succession management, and a performance management system.

4. Reward management systems most clearly communicate to em-

ployees the kind of behaviour and goals that are expected and important for the organisation. In high power distance societies, rewards seem to be allocated without a clear criteria and without goals, such as improved individual or group performance, acquisition of new knowledge or skills, innovations or other improvements of the work process. On the other hand, humane, future and performance oriented societies that try to avoid uncertainty about the behaviour of their members, utilise reward management systems to stimulate the desired results. Through rewards for acquired knowledge, skills, created innovations, and work performance, organisations stimulate the acquisition and creation of new knowledge as well as its utilisation on the job. Another society's attribute that also affects the kind of rewards organisations give to their members is family collectivism. In societies where pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness is expected from their members, group performance is more often rewarded, and non-financial rewards are more often given.

5. Regular informing of employees and communication channels that allow free upward communication are necessary elements of knowledge management, especially for knowledge creation, its utilisation and dissemination throughout the organisation. In high power distance societies such practices are not desired neither from management nor from subordinates. In humane, future and performance oriented, and uncertainty avoiding societies, more attention is paid on a regular informing of employees, higher importance is given to their ideas, knowledge, information or grievances.

The results of the study show that employee's perceptions of societal cultural characteristics are related to knowledge management oriented HRM practices, especially to four of them: power distance, humane orientation, future orientation, performance orientation, and uncertainty avoidance. A high positive relationship between HRM practices and cultural dimensions of humane orientation, future and performance orientation, and uncertainty avoidance are explainable. Societies that perceive their members as valuable develop and implement prescriptions and proscriptions that are aimed to protect people and invest in them. Such society's characteristics are transmitted in organisations through formal and informal rules, norms or legislation, and through attitudes and behaviour of employees. Performance orientation is closely related to future orientation and uncertainty avoidance. Striving for results and excellence in all fields of activities requires people that are oriented toward the future, analyse future needs and requirements for their fulfil-

ment, set clear goals and plans that lead to their realisation. For developing and implementing effective HRM practices, the described systematic approach is needed. Moreover, an orientation toward results and the future per se stimulate the perception of employees and their knowledge as valuable resources.

The results also suggest that power distance is the attribute that has the most obstructing impact on the implementation of HRM practices. Similar results are shown in Hofstede's (1997) studies and Aycan's et al. (2000) work. The reason probably lies in the nature of power distance. HRM practices aimed to add value to employees and their knowledge require the involvement of management and subordinates. In high power distance countries such attitude represents a threat to power and subordination, not only because more possibilities for vertical development are given to lower levels, but also because more knowledge equipped employees, reward systems, upward communication paths etc. could show the mistakes of those who are in power, expose those which have shown the mistakes, and put both sides in an uncomfortable position.

Fig. 2 presents the averages of nine cultural dimensions for Slovenia. The most pronounced characteristics of society as perceived by a sample of Slovenian employees are power distance and family collectivism, while the least pronounced are future orientation, performance and humane orientation. According to the results of the study, current cultural characteristics are not too much prone to a systematic knowledge management in Slovenian organisations. Cultural values are difficult to change and so the cultural change is hardly achieved through the change of values (Hofstede 1980). Daily practices, policies and behaviour are more malleable and under conscious control of people (Schein 1985). Through the change of daily routines the change of values can be achieved, but this process is slow and requires full involvement of all society's institutions. An alternative solution is offered by Mendonca and Kanungo (1994). They argue that the proper step to achieve the desired results of HRM practices is to develop practices that take cultural characteristics into account. Through a 'culture-fit' approach more positive effects are achieved than by a direct transfer of foreign practices: local cultural identity is retained, people are more willing to accept new practices, and the probability of their effectiveness is greater.

The results of this investigation should be taken as preliminary because they are based only on the results of the sample of Slovenian employees, i. e. are based on the individual-level of analysis. By interpreting

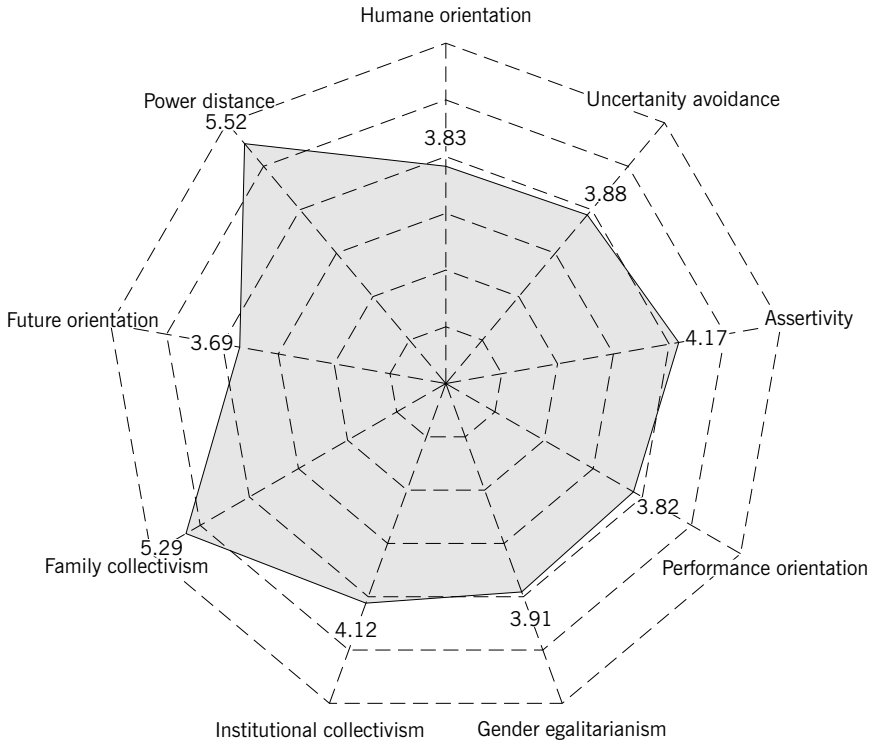


FIGURE 2 Societal cultural dimensions as perceived by a sample of Slovenian employees ($N = 842$)

the results on the society-level, we are close to the ‘reverse fallacy’ mistake (Hofstede 1997). A further research on the relationship between the society’s HRM practices and culture is needed, with more detailed indicators of HRM practices, especially those oriented toward a more effective knowledge management.

The study shows that the knowledge about societal cultural characteristics can be useful for HRM for a critical analysis of practices used to foster knowledge management. One implication of our study is that HRM practices could not be copied or transferred from other societies but should be adapted to local cultural characteristics.

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