

Interactions of Organizational Culture and Collaboration in Working and Learning

Ioan PASTOR

ioan_pastor@yahoo.com

"Petru Maior" University, Tîrgu Mureş, Romania

Abstract

This paper reports the methodologies and findings of research done into learning processes in two diverse environments. The research focused on identifying factors that enable and facilitate social learning. These factors are discussed in view of the preliminary architecture and in view of the socio-technical environment within people work and learn. The paper concludes by suggesting that the development of information system requires an understanding of the cultural and interpersonal issues prevalent in work environments.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Organizational culture, Organizational learning, Socio-technical approach

1. Introduction

The management and organizational learning literature of the 1990s reflects profound and continuous changes in the business climate due to uncertainty. In this world of uncertainty, organizations need to continually renew, reinvent and reinvigorate themselves in order to respond creatively to market forces. This process of reinvigorating requires shifts in organizational structures and processes. Organizational knowledge and how it is effectively incorporated into the organization's practice is the critical issue for business activity. Many organizations invest heavily in implementing information technology (IT) in the hope of providing a seamless solution to managing information resources and organizational knowledge. Unfortunately, these initiatives are often implemented without much regard to how people in organizations go about acquiring, sharing and making use of information. There is an increasing awareness of the importance of the social aspects of systems. Some researchers argue that a solid understanding of organizational culture, human (social) interactions, communication and relationship is required in order to make progress.

This paper sheds further sight on the personal, cultural, social and organizational factors that facilitate organizational learning. The immediate aim of this research is to understand the issues inherent in building learning, adaptive and sustainable organizations. The long-term objective is to develop architectures that will support the development of information system to guide and enhance organizational learning and facilitate knowledge management.

2. Social learning

As Jordan (1996) explains, informal learning is inherent in all human activities. In work life, socially-based learning occurs frequently. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to the interactions between people and the environment as situated experience or situated learning. It is through learning that we see ourselves in a different context and this transformation of oneself through learning is particularly important if one is to contribute to the dynamic changes in the organizational landscape.

For this research, social learning is defined as learning occurring within a group, an organization, or any cultural cluster and it includes:

- ✚ the procedures that facilitate generative learning – learning that enhances the enterprise's ability to adjust to dynamic and unexpected situations and to react creatively to them;
- ✚ the procedures by which knowledge and practice are transmitted across posting cycles, throughout time and across different work situations.

Below is a brief description of the study methodology, on the role of personal and cultural factors in social and collaborative learning in the workplace.

3. Study Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the research, as well as the importance of the context, there were used techniques in the form of fieldwork. This entails observing work in different settings and using directed questioning to clarify issues. In addition to observation, I used unstructured interviews with a sample of personnel from the joint and single service strategic HQs. A stratified sampling technique was used to ensure adequate representation including: branch and sub-branch affiliation, gender, rank, work location, and duration of placement. Fifty-nine interviews were conducted, 15 in the joint service headquarters and 44 in a single service headquarters.

Furthermore, quantitative surveys were also used in both joint service and HQs. In both settings, the total population was surveyed and the response rate in the joint HQ was 96,7 % and the single service HQ, 71 %. The purpose of the survey was to validate the qualitative findings foremost, and also to move the focus of the research from „what the researcher might think” to „what the staff of a particular setting thinks”. Research data were triangulated by methods of data collection and by functional role .

4. Study findings

The findings represent the collective research results to date; preliminary results are discussed in this paper. These findings are multilayered and have resulted in the following set of overarching values that facilitate effective social learning:

- ✚ empowerment;
- ✚ forgiveness of mistake making;
- ✚ trust;
- ✚ individual and organizational commitment;
- ✚ sharing of information;
- ✚ openness of decision making;
- ✚ cultural cohesiveness.

Although I do not use the term „organizational climate” or „organizational culture”, the set of overarching values are reflective of these terms. I do not take a position on whether this set of value is solely an organizational property adopted by individuals or wheter it is influenced by, or based on individual members, behaviour and beliefs.

Apart from the overriding set of values, an additional set of factors that enables effective social learning was identified. These factors fall into two categories. The first, Learning Capability Development, refers to characteristics in the environment and provides a context in which the second category operates. This second category is referred to as Enablers and represents processes and strategies that, if present and effectively applied in an enterprise, can facilitate social learning.

The characteristics of these Enablers, like the organization's set of values, emanate from personal and cultural elements within it. The Enablers can, from time to time, be either challenged or inhibited by these elements; examples might include uncertainty of budget allocations, inconsequential work practices, a highly politicised environment, organizational change (change fatigue), and changing organizational cultural values.

5. Factors and Constructs

I identified seven basic categories that constitute enabling processes and strategies to facilitate social learning: Common Identity, Problem Solving, Team Building, Access to Information, Development of Individual Expertise, Communication, and Induction and Enculturation.

Common Identity – a common ground/understanding to which many people/groups can subscribe, and requires a shift from seeing oneself as separate to seeing oneself as connected to and part of an organization unit. Based on this research, issues impacting on Common Identity are: goal alignment, cultural identity, gender identity, language, morale, and workplace design (spatial and physical design).

Problem Solving – a core activity. Problem solving fosters social learning, because it represents an opportunity to generate knowledge. Issues associated with this enabler are: networking, improvisation, perceptions of the organization, systemic understanding, and time for inquiry and reflection.

Team building – working together and understanding what each member is trying to do. Team building is essential to effective social learning and problem solving. Issues associated with this enabler are: leadership, team-based morale, performance management, public recognition and reward systems, use of humour, and workplace design.

Access to information – the easy availability to corporate information in whatever format. Access was observed to affect knowledge acquisition and generation of new knowledge and social learning. Issues associated with this enabler are: record keeping, networking, meetings, and information technology (IT) infrastructure.

Development of individual expertise - the acquisition and development of expertise was seen as an integral part of social learning. Issues associated with this enabler are: career trajectories, professional currency, professional training, postings and promotion, and mentoring.

Communication – this enabler was observed to be essential to effective learning within an organization and to effective social learning. Issues associated with this enabler are: overall communication climate, formal and informal flows, time for inquiry and reflection, use of humor, language, and workplace design.

Induction and enculturation – facilitates social learning by providing a foundation upon which an individual can become fully productive. Issues associated with this enabler are: timeliness and comprehensiveness of the process, buddy/mentoring system, handovers and information packages, and training. These factors enabling social learning identified from the data are by no means exhaustive.

6. Data summary

Research on the cultural aspects of those organisations that foster new knowledge and generative learning suggests that employee trust and open communication play an integral role. Furthermore, higher levels of trust between managers and employees are correlated with more open communication.

The research reported in the literature supports these findings that trust is pivotal in climates of organizational change and when environments are uncertain. The results of the quantitative surveys indicate that trust in the leaders and their decision-making played an important part, with just over half (53%) of the respondents in the single setting strategic HQ saying that they trust decisions made by their leaders. It is interesting to note that the higher up the chain of command, the greater the level of agreement with this statement. One of the informants put it very succinctly: „We need a far more open information network that actually allows us to see how the organization works”.

The findings on open communication were also indicative that levels of trust amongst lower level staff are greater than between them and senior defence managers. For instance, 96 % and 84 %, respectively, in the joint and single service strategic settings reported being able to voice their opinions to their immediate supervisor. Furthermore, a large proportion (75 % and 60 %) felt that they received adequate feedback, and a vast majority (84 % and 80 %) felt they were taking part in decision that affect their work. On the other hand, this open communication was not perceived to be as prevalent with senior managers, with only 30 % and 32 % respectively agreeing that they could voice their opinions to them. During the period of frequent organizational changes only 17 % and 40 % respectively indicated that the organizational change process was consultative at all levels. However, it is interesting to note that 81 % and 72 % respectively said that they were comfortable with expressing their views about the changes taking place. Table 1 shows these results.

Table 1. Quantitative findings on trust and open communication

Question	Joint Strategic Setting (%)	Single Service Strategic Setting (%)
I trust the decision made by leaders	-	53
I am able to voice my work-related opinions to immediate supervisor	96	84
I have the opportunity to voice my work-related opinions to senior defence managers	30	32
I receive adequate feedback on my work	75	60
I take part in the decision-making processes that affect my work	84	80
Organizational change process involved consultative process at all levels	17	40
I was comfortable in expressing my views about organizational change	81	72

7. Information Sharing

Shein (1993) and Phillips (1997) have studied the impact of information sharing on the development of common identity (commonality). They suggest that information sharing promotes common identity, mutual trust, and organizational learning, and is directly related to organizational cultures that foster generative learning. Shein (1993) also claims that opening up and sharing encourages integration between organizational subcultures and in turn, organizational adaptation to change. The findings of this study strongly suggest that in addition to an information sharing culture, the development of common identity is achieved also through induction and enculturation progress. This aspect of common identity was not effective in the joint service strategic HQ since only 12 % stated that their induction was well managed and 33 % reported that they received adequate briefing regarding their duties. The following comment well summarises the sentiments of many people I interviewed:

„Through my 25 years experience, handovers are a disaster, for the most part –with some exceptions. If the individuals take effort to do a good handover, that will occur. Organizationally, there’s very little in place to make it happen”.

Enculturation and induction are forms of sharing information. If effective, they not only promote development of common identity but also facilitate social learning by providing a foundation upon which the individual can become fully productive more quickly, and thus is more likely to generate new knowledge. It follows, therefore, that negative perceptions of induction held by members of the joint service strategic HQ could hinder social learning.

In the single service strategic HQ, the results were more encouraging with 46 % feeling positive about the conduct of their induction to the organization and 51 % receiving adequate briefing about their duties. Further, 59 % stated that when they first joined in it only took a few weeks before they had a good grasp of how the team did things. In this setting, therefore, social

learning would be facilitated via the promotion of common identity as well as by the transfer of information and organizational knowledge.

8. Forgiveness in Culture

It was observed that settings characterised by a culture of forgiveness and a climate where exploration, mistakes and taking some risk were allowable were those where collaborative generation of new ideas was more prevalent. Forgiveness for mistake making is one of the basic stumbling blocks because it slows or prevents or even erodes some of the knowledge as it moves through the organization (sharing of information). Organizations have a responsibility to create a culture in which learning occurs, and that culture will determinate the quality of learning that takes place. A culture that minimises the fear of making mistakes and exercises praise and rewards, not only for those who succeed but also for those who tried hard and might not have achieved the desired results, is important in the learning organisation. Open communication and the encouragement of questions are effective vehicles for driving organizational learning.

This culture of forgiveness and learning from mistakes was widely prevalent in the tactical environment where mistakes were freely, admitted and discussed. This process became a vehicle from which the whole group benefited. It was observed that this positive communication climate was supported by a high level of trust between group members and across hierarchy. Also, in the single service strategic HQ, 92 % of those surveyed reported that can positively learn from the mistakes they make, and the same percentage stated that their supervisor would stand by them when they make a good suggestion. Research indicates that when supervisors are highly supportive of their subordinates (e.g., showing concern for the employee's ideas and feelings), is enhances employee initiative at work.

A vast majority of respondents (99%) were willing to share their knowledge not only within their immediate team but also across directorates and other functional groups, and 93 % stated that they were neither inhibited in asking for help, nor did they hide their lack of knowledge if they were unsure how to do their job. In the joint strategic environment, on the other hand, the climate of forgiveness and the application of lesson learned were not so prevalent. A number of informants said they avoided asking questions because „the culture was unforgiving and there was intolerance for not knowing” However, I was also told that in order to learn and do one's job well it was necessary to have „an arrogance of not knowing” and that one can't be expected to know certain things without asking questions, and that if criticised, one should respond by saying „well no, I don't know and I really do think there's a problem”

It was also observed, in the case of some individuals, that having information and knowledge was perceived as having power: „...he's just the type of guy that if you get something out of him, it's like he's doing you a favour...it's just like he's scoring a point by doing it”.

The tendency to hold on to information rather than share it would inhibit social learning by preventing its transfer to other. Withholding of information may hinder or even prevent individuals from developing a knowledge foundation from which new knowledge can be generated. Indeed, this expertise when combined with "position power" provides the power base that makes one indispensable and influential in the organization.

9. Information technology and learning

Information technology plays an important role in enabling organizations to use information and knowledge to their strategic advantage. To investigate information technology's role in collaborative learning, I gathered self-reported data on the use of human and non-human means of acquiring and transferring knowledge. The data pointed to information technology being used as a vehicle for better utilising personal networks complementing rather than replacing person-to-person contact. For instance, in the single service headquarters, personal networks and then meetings were ranked as the most preferred non-technology information sources. Further, email and telephone were ranked above shared drives and Internet/Intranet sources as

preferred technology-based information sources. These results suggest that even when employees are using technology, they are doing so to enhance communication within their personal networks. Moreover, informal channels, such as chatting with colleagues, either in person, over the phone or via emails, were used by 62 % of respondents to obtain work-related information. Interestingly, the majority of these were middle managers or below, and although 59 % of respondents also claimed to use formal means to obtain work-related information, the largest proportion were senior managers. This apparent contradiction is clarified by data from semi-structured interviews where the vast majority of people, across all settings, stated that they found human sources the most effective, and usually the most efficient, means to obtain work-related information.

A possible explanation for this preference may be that information from technology-based sources might be stripped out of its context and rendered less meaningful. Through interpersonal interactions individuals are able to probe and question and not only the desired information but also the richness of contextual meaning. The study results point to the technology being used to facilitate interpersonal networks within which interaction occurs. Another possible explanation for these preferences is that much information is actually knowledge that resides only in people's minds. The preferences are not due to ineffective records management because there has been no codification into a written form.

10. Conclusions

The implication of this study is that organizations seeking to improve information sharing and knowledge generation need to develop a greater awareness of the processes and strategies of organizational learning. Organizational knowledge is distributed across functional groups and its generation and continual existence is dependant on the overall communication climate which is embedded in the organizational culture. This study indicates that information sharing and subsequent knowledge generation would be successful when interactive environments are cultivated before technology based solutions are implemented.

References

1. Boboc I., *Organizational and managerial behaviour*, Economica Publisher, Bucharest, 2003;
2. Gary J. *Organizational behaviour*, Economica Publisher, Bucharest, 1996;
3. Deaconu A., colab. *Organizational behaviour and human resource management*, Bucharest, ASE Publisher, 2002;
4. Militaru Gh., *Organizational behaviour*, Economica Publisher, Bucharest, 2005;
5. Pastor I., *Current issues of human resource management*, Risoprint Publisher, Cluj-Napoca, 2008;
6. Preda M., *Organizational behaviour*, Polirom Publisher, Bucharest, 2006;
7. Vlasceanu M., *Organizations and organizational behaviour*, Polirom Publisher, Bucharest, 2003