

# CULTURAL BARRIERS IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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## **Abstract: Cultural barriers in knowledge sharing**

*Knowledge management and support of its activities from human, as well as technological side, is new and very actual. The purpose of this article is to briefly inform about problems connected with sharing knowledge as one of the basic activities of knowledge management. The article is divided into two parts, the first part describes individual and social barriers of knowledge sharing. The second is dedicated to the conflict of motives as a special individual obstacle arising partly from other barriers, but mostly from the used incentive system.*

**Key words:** *knowledge management, knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing barriers*

## **1. Preface**

Knowledge management (KM) and its activities is beginning to be implemented at the rapid pace in some world as well as Czech companies. In spite of this the knowledge management problems and its support from all employees and efficient information technologies (IT) are new and very actual. One of the activity of KM is knowledge sharing. Which is equal to other activities closely associated with IT. As an example companies could use sophisticated web pages for employees to enable knowledge sharing. This idea is very smart and theoretically almost perfect. It is assumed, that employees will visit these pages, save documents, send messages, communicate and use their contents. However in some companies is commonplace, that although the pages are user friendly and their lucidity is on a high level, a lot of directories or areas except the most basic documents saved by pages creators are empty. Here is evidence, that this technology has met the problem sometimes called the "cultural wall" [5]. Here we can clearly see how important is the "human-computer" relationship, the ability and willingness to use these technologies. Therefore the KM requires changes both in corporate culture and in deployed technological solutions and work procedures. This serves as an example of necessity of interaction between social and technological subsystems which demonstrates the fact that IT enables searching, storing, manipulation and sharing of a vast volume of information as well as conversion of data into information, with minimum time and space constraints. But the meaning of used information still depends on individuals, because they have the ability to interpret them in context. Thus individuals are related to other people, techniques and technologies that can have different opinions of a single problem. Here it is possible to see the main relation, since techniques used by employees determine, how efficiently the technologies are used and in which context the meaning of concrete information is understood. The ultimate consequence is the fact that in knowledge sharing IT plays an important role but not a central one. The goal of this article is to turn over the existence of some cultural barriers in knowledge sharing. The main attention is dedicated to conflict of motives and to the fact that some people do not realize the connection between insufficient knowledge sharing and this type of barrier.

## **2. Individual and social barriers**

At first glance it appears that the easiest way to improve knowledge sharing is to convert the corporate culture. It is possible, naturally, but it is necessary to realize, that the change of corporate culture is not simple and quickly feasible. This change must be gradual and therefore requires a lot of time, energy and financial resources. We can identify two different approaches to support knowledge sharing in KM. The first approach is based on the change of corporate culture, which accommodates to knowledge management system. The second approach, and less known and sometimes qualified as more successful [5], is based on the accommodating of knowledge management system to existing corporate culture.

In both approaches common cultural barriers exist. Therefore the recognition of subjective and objective nature of the knowledge is necessary [10]. Knowledge can exist as the object in a form of explicit, implicit and tacit knowledge. But subjective component of the knowledge, which is formed by social practices of teams, working groups, departments, etc., is also important [1]. This subjective component is probably worse defined. Communication in institution runs between individuals and groups and that is why we have to pay attention to both knowledge components. On these ideas we can argue, that social practices (elements of corporate culture) of the community (team, department, institution, etc.) affect the knowledge and it's consequent sharing. Here we can meet a sort of cultural

knowledge modification, because knowledge can be considered as the sum of information in the context that is dependent on the social group creating it. The main goal should be the correct routing of this modification, which can only become effective upon transparency in knowledge sharing in appropriate corporate culture. Therefore the correct corporate culture is so necessary.

Talking about social groups we should realize that collective knowledge of teams or groups (i.e. amoebas) and not individual knowledge is the basic asset of many institutions. In this direction it is possible to see KM as a harmonious work environment where employees [2]:

- a) store best practices in knowledge repositories
- b) learn, discuss and talk with co-workers
- c) write reports and prepare written analysis
- d) express openly their comments and provide proposals and responses
- e) document their insights into problems
- f) use existing knowledge repository for achieving their tasks.

Within this broad scope of idealism it is possible to recognize higher productivity, effectiveness and innovation of work. All these processes mentioned above should be supported by IT, because IT industry supplies many tools and techniques for KM. However this theoretical perfection would unfortunately be very difficult to attain in practice. The main problems are made of cultural constraints that can be divided into individual and social barriers.

**As the main individual barriers** we can identify (barriers 1, 2 and 3 was borrowed from [2]):

- 1) loss of power – by providing knowledge (about customers, competitors, suppliers, procedures, methods, processes, etc.) to the colleague the exclusivity of influence is reduced, which can ensure some certainty of work or respect. “Knowledge is the power”;
- 2) fear from revelation – by providing knowledge we show, that this knowledge has a value. If this assessment is not shared by other repository users, embarrassment may happen;
- 3) uncertainty – especially younger and less experienced employees can feel uncertainty, because they can not judge if their working results represent valuable knowledge for others. It may be difficult for junior staff to estimate the worth of their knowledge for other members of staff or the company as a whole;
- 4) illusion of reward deprivation – some employees see in knowledge sharing the way how they can lose their work rewards, because they give their knowledge and experience to someone else who may be rewarded by salary increases. Alongside knowledge sharing is understood as additional work. Therefore some employees expect “something more”;
- 5) single culture elements – employees are not able to concretely name basic corporate values, needs and goals although they know a lot about the company;
- 6) difference between awareness and knowledge – some employees have mostly only awareness of the problem, but they do not know anything more. It affects that they do not want to “hear again things they already know”;
- 7) conflict of motives – separate part of the article is dedicated to this barrier.

**To the main social barriers** we can assign (barriers 1, 2, 3 and 4 was borrowed from [2]):

- 1) language – in some companies the language used in one section, department or division is unintelligible for others. Therefore the main rules of one language should be respected. In frame of individuals there can be better understandable tacit knowledge, mental models, opinions, beliefs, etc.;
- 2) conflict avoidance – sometimes we can recognize effort to avoid changes and do not risk too much. That affect new knowledge and approaches containing new ideas or innovative points of view can be lost (“do not rock do boat” attitude);
- 3) bureaucracy and hierarchy – high level of bureaucracy and administrative institution type often use procedures and approaches worsening knowledge sharing;
- 4) incoherent paradigms - the difference between personal intents and paradigms of company (values, strategy, mission, vision, etc.) makes difficulty in expressing and justifying opinions, which do not fit with the ruling paradigms of company;
- 5) underestimating of lower levels – in most cases top management pursue “traditional” KM based on storing of information from past with the assumption, that the future information will need to be the same. This attitude takes knowledge workers as passive information receivers only. Management gathers the content of organizational memory as a final product in design time and

than disseminate this content. This is a typical “top-down” approach. “Creative” approach to KM, described in [3], is based on hypothesis, that knowledge workers create the new knowledge during their work time. This approach takes knowledge workers as experts solving new and weakly structured problems during daily work. This perspective has two important aspects. Firstly, workers, not management, create company’s knowledge base in working time, and secondly, knowledge is a side effect of the work;

- 6) bad appraisal of the co-worker knowledge base – communication plays an important role in knowledge sharing. If we will respect the process of communication described in [4], we can find this type of barrier in second step called “coding of idea”. This means idea transmission to the language understandable by the receiver. If the sender is not able to estimate the state and size of receiver’s knowledge base, knowledge sharing does not have to be fecund even when the communication process happened;
- 7) emotions – emotions affect upon the willingness of employees to share knowledge with anybody. It is not easy to compel two employees to share knowledge with unfriendly and spiteful relationship;
- 8) pseudoinnovators – pseudoinnovators are people who play up their opinions as “necessary” improvements of others ideas, pieces of knowledge or proposals, to stress their importance and dispensability.

### 3. Conflict of motives

One of the main reasons of insufficient knowledge sharing, which is not very often realized, is the individual conflict of motives. We can understand this special case of frustration in the generally psychological level, where it represents nursing of incompatible tendencies [6].

It is obvious that this conflict dissatisfies us through postponing of necessary or covetable reaction. It brings us to the decision-making, which can be very persnickety because of reciprocally incompatible tendencies. In special resources we can find various models of conflicts (topologic, cybernetic, phenomenological, etc.) [6]. But the most widespread is K. Lewin’s model defining conflict as “situation in which affect on individual simultaneously contrary oriented but approximately equally strong tendencies” [6],[7]. The definition can be envisaged to encompass five basic conceptual components:

- a) appetence-appetence
- b) aversion-aversion
- c) appetence-aversion
- d) I do not want to, but I have to
- e) I want to, but I can not

The brief description of these conflicts and their relationship to knowledge sharing comes after. This relationship is build on basic assumptions:

1. wide-ranging incentives are used in institutions. These incentives should ensure improvement of knowledge sharing among individuals, individuals and groups and groups in institution and overcome existing barriers. This incentive system (including financial or tangible rewards) is perceived positively by employees, it means arbitrary part of this system is for them really motivating;
2. majority of people perceive knowledge sharing as negative, unpleasant or undesirable, due to the reasons mentioned above.

Conflict **appetence-appetence** is relatively easy conflict because individual has to decide between two positive alternatives. The solution of this conflict lies in sudden higher attraction of one alternative. This type of conflict is not due to basic assumptions considered as possible. But if this type of conflict takes place, it should not be a big problem for the employee, because he has to only choose one incentive or reward from the incentive system.

Conflict **aversion-aversion** is over against considered as the hardest one. An individual has to choose from two negative alternatives. The final decision is usually postponed as long as possible. If he/she deliberates closer to an alternative, its hideousness is growing and this principle is the same by the second alternative. But one alternative become finally stronger and less unpleasant and individual will decide for it. Sometimes he/she can abandon this idea, but in the end he/she has to decide. Due to described assumptions this conflict is not presumptive.

Conflict **appetence-aversion** is the special situation, when an object (here the knowledge sharing) is both inviting and forbidding. It is obvious from our assumptions, that this conflict type will be the most frequent. There are some incentives, but on the other hand, it is necessary to share knowledge to achieve them. It means for some employees treating of their positions, values, etc. (see individual barriers). Roots of this conflict are seen daily in our society, where one gains his/her prestige, name, position, job, revenues, etc. thanks to education and knowledge. From a psychological point of view this is interesting as the intensity of aversion grows in proportion to it's realization. The reciprocal also holds true. To be concrete, if an employee has to contribute to the knowledge repository, it is not such a big problem for him as in time, he can talk about it. Once the realization of this contribution is drawing on the negative feelings connected with described barriers are increasing. The final realization depends only on the employee's personality. N.E.Miller (according to [6]) in research based on this conflict type postulated principles of ambivalent behavior:

1. the tendency to approach to the goal is stronger, closer the subject is to this goal;
2. the tendency to avoid a negative alternative is stronger, closer the subject is to this alternative;
3. the tendency to avoid a negative alternative increases upon approaching this alternative when compared to the tendency to come closer to the positive alternative;
4. appetence and aversion gradients are depend on the intensity of incitement; the tendencies are more intensive with more intensive incitements.

In third point is possible to see the crucial moment of insufficient knowledge sharing in many institutions. It is also important that after the individual realize one alternative the dissonance is appearing connected with the effort to reappraise this decision. For nearer and more concrete explanation – immediately after the decision to share knowledge we accept both the positive attributes (i.e. rewards) and the negative ones (i.e. potential losts of exclusivity) and together with it we refuse the positive attributes of knowledge non sharing (i.e. increased self-confidence, stronger position, etc.). This reassessment occurs because of dissonance reducing and consists in overestimating of positive attributes of knowledge sharing and in underestimating of negative attributes. Knowledge non sharing has the inverse processes. By pursuing these processes the employee tries to assure himself/herself in the choice rightness. Here the institution plays very important role, because somebody (seniors, team leader) has to help him/her and convince him/her about the choice rightness.

The conflict, "**I do not want to, but I have to**", has typically negative motivational goals for the individual and he/she is persuaded from "outside" about positive values. He/she is pushed to achieving this goal. This conflict is very similar to previous conflict and its occurrence is also very frequent. It occurs because of our assumption that employees do not want to share knowledge and they do not have the need to perform this type of activity, but top management "press" them using the incentive system.

Conflict, "**I want to but I can not**", is inverse to the previous one. However the mechanism is the same. We suppose, that this conflict type is not very frequent, because it is hard to imagine the institution preventing the knowledge sharing in meaning of the direct preventing, because the existence of inadequate conditions (indirect preventing) is possible (bad work description, insufficient education and employees development, physical organization of work, etc.).

In all situations we have to consider the fact that the reaction to the conflict is mostly specific and egocentric [6]. Individual approach to every employee and aimed stimulation should be the result.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Individual and social barriers often prevent effective knowledge sharing. It is therefore necessary to identify and eliminate the maximal number of these barriers. Some of them are possible to remove completely but some of them will still remain. These remaining barriers are necessary to minimize in relation to the given conditions. One of these remaining barriers is conflict of motives arising from some knowledge management processes, especially from knowledge sharing. This barrier is deeply rooted in our social system and supported by incentive system. In conflict of motives it is possible to see the interconnection of some barriers, which we have to take in consideration. In fighting with individual and social barriers we can use tools and techniques like narrative, expressive communication, trust, managing people, team work, balanced usage of codification and personalization approaches, design and organization of workplaces. But also the usage of social informed systems (i.e. Babble [9]), in which we can see and utilize social practices, or using various design and realization models of whole KM system including IT (i.e. SER [3]). Forasmuch as their

extent and small attention in this article, separate article should be devoted to them. They should be the objective of further research.

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