

Does the Culture of an Organization Affect Information Use?

by Chun Wei Choo

A great deal of effort has been put into developing systems and other means to manage institutional information, sometimes without a clear understanding of the organization's information use patterns. When thinking about the relationship between an organization and its information-related activities, two questions come to mind. First, does the information culture in an organization have an impact on how information is used? Second, is there a way to identify information behaviours and values (IBVs) that denote and differentiate an organization's information culture? To answer these questions, three colleagues and I completed a research project to explore the link between information culture and information use in organizations (Choo et al. 2008).

Three Canadian organizations participated in the study: a legal firm (L), a public health organization (H), and an engineering company (E). In each organization, all employees, including professional, managerial, technical, and support staff, were invited to take part. L is one of the largest Canadian-based national law firms, employing about 1,700 staff. H is a Québec based public organization in the field of health science, with about 550 employees. Its role is to develop scientific knowledge and transfer it for use in health policy, research, and training. E is an engineering firm based in Ontario. With 150 employees, it specializes in the creation of aviation simulators for training pilots and technicians on jet aircraft and helicopters.

The primary method of data collection was a web-based questionnaire survey, generating 698 responses. Most questions were presented as statements that respondents rated on a scale of one to five, designed to identify five sets of IBVs:

Integrity (using information in a principled and trustful way)

Informality (trust and use of informal sources)

Transparency (openness in reporting information)

Sharing (providing others with information)

Proactiveness (actively obtaining and applying new information)

The main variable under consideration was “information use outcomes,” which was addressed with questions on the impact of information use, the adoption of new ideas, and information sharing.

Our analysis found that there were different sets of IBVs for each organization, thus implying that the organizations were differentiated by distinctive information cultures. The information culture of L was characterized by Integrity, Transparency, Sharing, Proactiveness, and Informality; the information culture of H by Transparency, Proactiveness, and Sharing; and that of E by Sharing, Integrity, and Proactiveness.

When it came to sharing information with people and groups outside the organization, both L (law firm) and E (engineering company) had much lower mean scores than H (public health agency). One might assume that this reflected the mandate of H to transfer its knowledge to its external partners and stakeholders. H also showed the highest means for the Transparency factor, with an emphasis on encouraging openness. In contrast, Transparency was not extracted at all in E, perhaps an indication of the strong commercial impetus that was driving this company. Informality (the use of informal sources) as an IBV was found only in L, and it is tempting to conjecture that this was due to the importance of personal networks in the legal profession. The lowest means were for the Integrity factor in organization E, with a low score suggesting that it was common in that organization to control information for personal advantage.

Having found consistent as well as distinctive profiles of IBVs in the three organizations, our analysis then revealed that each IBV was correlated with positive information use outcomes (i.e., higher levels of information use impact and creativity). Looking at their combined effect, the set of IBVs of each organization was able to account significantly for the variation in information use outcomes. Among the IBVs examined, the information values relating to Proactiveness and Sharing had the largest impact on information use outcomes.

To summarize, our research showed that the part of organizational culture that deals specifically with information –

the values and norms that people have about creating, sharing, and applying information – has a significant effect on information use outcomes. The study suggested that it is possible to systematically identify behaviours and values that characterize an organization’s information culture, and that this characterization could be helpful in understanding the information use effectiveness of all sorts of organizations, including private businesses, government agencies, and publicly funded institutions such as libraries and museums.

REFERENCE

Chun Wei Choo, Pierrette Bergeron, Brian Detlor, and Lorna Heaton. (2008). Information Culture and Information Use: An Exploratory Study of Three Organizations. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 59(5), 792-804.

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