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Influence of corporate culture on the use of knowledge management techniques and technologies

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1 Introduction

Knowledge and innovation are increasingly regarded as the most strategic resources of organizations (Itzkin 2000). As a result, the creative use of existing knowledge and the acquisition, assimilation and development of new knowledge have become significant to any organization's competitive advantage.

Davenport and Cronin (2000) contend that the interplay of tacit and explicit knowledge can be regarded

as the key to knowledge management (KM). Since it is rather difficult to capture tacit knowledge, organizations are increasingly implementing KM techniques and technologies to reveal and share this type of knowledge.

However, various obstacles exist regarding the implementation of KM techniques and technologies in organizations. Ndlela and Du Toit (2000) maintain that it is important to consider the type of culture residing within an organization, since the cultural habits of members of an organization affect the way in which it manages knowledge. As a result of this observation, one could enquire whether an organization's culture could persuade or discourage individuals to make use of KM techniques and technologies to create, codify and share knowledge.

Consequently the aim of this research was to answer the following question: *What is the influence of corporate culture on the use of KM techniques and technologies in organizations?*

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2 Methodology

To gain a better understanding of the influence corporate cultures have on the employment of KM techniques and technologies, four organizations [selected according to Handy's (2000) classification of corporate cultures, illustrated in Table 1] were examined. In each of these organizations, data were collected by means of in-depth personal interviews, focus group interviews and the completion of a force-choice checklist.

Participants were chosen according to their known or demonstrable experience regarding their organization's culture and the deployed KM techniques and technologies. They were selected from different backgrounds within their respective organizations (e.g. Human Resources and Information Technology departments) to provide specific insights into the influence of their organization's culture on KM techniques and technologies.

The findings of the empirical study were examined and analysed against a theoretical background obtained during a literature study.

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3 Corporate culture

To answer the above question, it is necessary to explain the concept 'corporate culture'. By defining corporate culture as 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members', Schein (1993:373–374) highlights the learning and interaction aspects of corporate culture.

McManus and Loughridge (2002:321) emphasize the time aspect of this concept by describing it as 'the pattern of shared values, norms, beliefs, activities and behaviour that have developed within an organisation over time'. Consequently one can assume that older organizations will possess more advanced cultures.

Referring to the above definitions, one could argue that 'corporate culture' incorporates values, norms and practices, including corporate experiences deemed valuable enough to be passed on to new members of an organization. Since corporate experiences form part of corporate culture, one could deduct that the older an organization is, the deeper its culture will be rooted and one can therefore agree with Ndlela and Du Toit's (2000) statement that 'culture is to an organization what personality is to the individual.'

In addition to this, it is important to note that in the same way, as different types of organizations exist, different types of corporate cultures also exist, some being more power-driven and others being more responsibility driven.

For the purpose of this article, four fundamental cultural types have been identified, based upon the

cultural groupings classified according to Handy (2000:19–35). Tthe main characteristics of each culture type are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Corporate culture types (Handy 2000:19–35)

Power-driven cultures …	**Role-driven cultures …**
• Accentuate fast, individual decision-making • Talk rather than write (short on documentation) • Emphasize empathy and trust • Depend on telepathy for effectiveness • Value the individual • Depend on networks • Think intuitively and holistically • Do not have many rules and regulations • Are essentially autocratic • Learn by trial and error • Are often found in small entrepreneurial organizations	• Encourage stability and predictability • Distinguish authority via organizational charts • Establish fixed roles and define boundaries of authority • Value the role (job description) rather than the individual • Accentuate the importance of 'duty' • Emphasize long-term careers • Emphasize rules and regulations • Are essentially bureaucratic • Are often found in organizations where stability and predictability are encouraged
Task-driven cultures …	**Character-driven cultures …**
• Are professions or project focused and staffed by experts • Emphasize enthusiasm and joint commitment • Judge performance in terms of results • Value expertise rather than position • Focus on creativity • Emphasize variety rather than predictability • Appreciate flexibility and high employee autonomy • Regard the organization as a network of loosely linked, independent units • Are often found in consultancy organizations	• Focus on the individual • Emphasize equal opportunities • Recognize individual skills as crucial assets • Concentrate on individual development and personal growth • Are often found in specialist groups such as lawyer partnerships

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4 Knowledge management techniques and technologies

Al-Ghassani (cited in Egbu, Kurul, Quintas, Hutchinson, Anumba, Al-Ghassani and Ruikar, 2003) regards KM techniques and technologies as instruments that can be used to pursue the implementation of KM. The same author considers 'KM techniques' as 'non-information technology (IT) tools' and 'KM technologies' as 'IT tools'. However, one should bear in mind that this remains a very artificial distinction since IT is often used to facilitate the implementation of KM techniques.

Authors such as Ruggles (1997:2) and Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka (2000:260–262) are of the opinion that the primary KM activities of most organizations revolve around knowledge creation, codification and transfer. Hence, for the purpose of this article, KM techniques and technologies have been classified according to three general categories, namely *knowledge creation*, *knowledge discovery and codification* and *knowledge collaboration and sharing*.

4.1 Knowledge creation techniques and technologies

Knowledge creation is vital to an organization's sustainability and competitiveness. Knowledge creation techniques and technologies support the generating of new ideas, recognition of new patterns, synthesizing of separate disciplines and the development of new processes (Ruggles 1997:2). Table 2 gives an indication of the most familiar knowledge creation techniques and technologies used in organizations. Since some KM techniques are heavily dependent on information technology (IT), a sub-table indicates which technologies can be used to support or enable the implementation of knowledge creation techniques and technologies.

Table 2 Knowledge creation techniques and technologies

TECHNIQUE/ TECHNOLOGY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION		ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES
BRAIN-STORMING	Brainstorming aims to develop creative solutions to problems. It can be carried out by groups or individuals or both. It is designed to generate a large number of ideas by helping people to think creatively and allowing them to participate fully, without feeling inhibited or criticized by others (De Bono 1992).		• Groupware • E-Mail • Chat rooms • Video/Tele-conferencing software • Virtual reality tools • Bulletin boards • Simulation technologies • Creativity software • Search engines • Internet • Intranet • Extranet • Portals
SCENARIO PLANNING	Scenario planning revolves around identifying current trends and events and exploring possible implications in developing these trends. Scenario planning promotes organizational learning, sensitizes employees to possible futures, and assists in developing strategies to cope with most scenarios (Schwartz 1991).		
COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE	Communities of practice (CoPs) are networks of people with a shared concern or passion regarding a specific topic, and who expand their knowledge and expertise in their area of interest through continuous interaction (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002:4).		
NETWORKING	Networking is an informal communications device operating via direct social channels on all levels within an organization, supporting formal organizational goals (Nicoll 1994:26). It also includes tools such as meetings at the water-cooler or coffee machines and the corporate grapevine.		
SUGGESTION SCHEMES	Suggestion schemes are official processes, encouraging employees to contribute ideas that might benefit an organization. Should it be the case, the employees will be rewarded for improving the manner in which an organization operates (Marx 1995:16).		
DATA MINING	Data mining looks for hidden correlations, patterns and interdependencies within large databases (that traditional information collection methods might miss) in order to discover new meaningful information (Gargano and Raggad 1999:81).		

4.2 Knowledge discovery and codification techniques and technologies

Once knowledge has been created within organizations, it is important that it be made available to others internally as well as externally, depending on the situation.

Knowledge discovery and codification techniques and technologies aim to represent knowledge in such a way that it becomes accessible and transferable (Ruggles 1997:4). Codifying organizational knowledge and allowing employees to put their ideas into practice can lead to the efficient transfer of experience within organizations. Table 3 provides a concise overview of knowledge discovery and codification techniques and technologies.

Table 3 Knowledge discovery and codification techniques and technologies

TECHNIQUE/ TECHNOLOGY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES
DATA WAREHOUSING	A data warehouse is a significant physical database, containing information from various sources, which is made available to employees in such a way that they can apply it in a business context. *Data mining* applications are used to derive business-oriented end-user-customized information from data warehouses (Ma, Chou and Yen 2000:125).	• Intelligent agents • Web crawlers • Neural computing • Data analysis and reporting tools • Mind mapping applications • Ontology tools • Rule induction decision trees • Search engines • Internet • Intranet • Extranet • Portals
EXPERT DIRECTORIES	Expert directories assist employees in locating colleagues in their organization who possess the knowledge and experience needed to perform a particular task. These directories are electronic rather than paper-based, allowing users to search them in a variety of ways, and are often also referred to as *white papers*, *skills directories* or *capabilities catalogues* (National Electronic Library for Health 2001).	
KNOWLEDGE MAPS	Knowledge maps are visual representations of organizational knowledge (both implicit and explicit) directing employees to address their knowledge needs (Davenport and Prusak 2000:72).	
KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORIES	Knowledge repositories are KM systems, which focus mainly on the storing of knowledge, under the notion that it will benefit the employees of an organization in a cost-effective manner. It is, however, difficult to guarantee that these repositories provide useful, accurate and up to date content (Gray 2001:369–370).	
DECISION SUPPORT SYSTEMS	A decision support system (DSS) is a computer program application, which analyses data and represents it in such a way that it supports business and organizational decision-making activities (searchCIO.com 2003). Through these systems, knowledge of a human expert is contained in a program that simulates human reasoning.	

4.3 Knowledge collaboration and sharing techniques and technologies

Organizations can obtain real power through effective knowledge transfer. Von Krogh *et al.* (2000:261–262) claim that while some organizations intend to locate existing as well as new organizational knowledge, their main objective is to transfer experiences and best practices in order to achieve a competitive advantage and avoid the duplication of knowledge creation.

Knowledge transfer occurs mainly on an interpersonal level, since knowledge in its richest form resides in people's minds. Although time, space, structural, economic and social barriers exist regarding collaborating and sharing knowledge (Davenport and Probst 2002; Ruggles 1997:10), certain techniques and technologies can be used to overcome these obstacles, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4 Knowledge collaboration and sharing techniques and technologies

TECHNIQUE/ TECHNOLOGY	BRIEF DESCRIPTION		ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES
KNOWLEDGE WORKSHOPS	Knowledge workshops are gatherings where employees aim to identify important organizational knowledge regarding products and processes. These workshops aim to identify knowledge gaps and to promote organizational learning. Sometimes knowledge workshops are transformed into CoPs (De Wit and Huysman 2000).		• Workflow management • Web-based file sharing tools • Process modelling tools • E-learning • Collaborative technologies • Internet • Intranet • Extranet • Portals
BEST PRACTICES	Best practices are processes or a method representing the most effective way of accomplishing a specific objective. Best practices have been tested and have proven to deliver good results and are therefore recommended as models (National Electronic Library for Health 2001).		
BENCHMARKING	Benchmarking can be regarded as the process of measuring services and practices against market leaders and learning why they achieve such a high level of performance (Blakeman 2002).		
LEARNING BY DOING	Learning is rooted in actual experiences, observations and reflections of concepts and generalizations. Since it could be very difficult to codify, store and communicate tacit knowledge, learning should be a pragmatic, interactive process (Pemberton and Stonehouse 2000:187).		
MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES	Mentoring comprises a set of activities such as induction programmes and coaching and support offered by managers and employees in key positions, to ensure that employees throughout the organization develop efficiently in order to apply knowledge effectively to the business of the organization (Marquardt 2000:237).		
STORYTELLING	The use of stories in organizations in order to convey tacit knowledge that might otherwise be difficult to express. Knowledge is transferred in informal language and in a narrative form that people enjoy (National Electronic Library for Health 2001).		

It is important to note that no concrete line can be drawn between the categories discussed above, since some KM techniques and technologies might fall into more than one of the predefined categories. Along these lines it is therefore viable to apply the techniques and technologies discussed in areas other than that of their primary use. By implication, it is thus possible to implement a technique that is predominantly used for the creation of knowledge, such as brainstorming, also to collaborate and share knowledge or to codify knowledge, and vice versa.

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5 Findings of the empirical study

Table 5 provides a concise overview as to what KM techniques and technologies are respectively implemented by the various cultures to create, codify and discover, and collaborate and share knowledge. The techniques and technologies that are used to a greater extent in each of the cultures are indicated in bold and italics. Where the same KM technique or technology is used for different purposes in a specific culture, it is marked with an asterix where it appears for the second and third time.

In addition, the most popular enabling technologies, different cultural attitudes to KM, and the main cultural obstacles to the use of KM techniques and technologies are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5 Summary of the findings

	Use of KM techniques and technologies per culture			
	Power-driven	**Role-driven**	**Task-driven**	**Character-driven**
Knowledge Creation	***Communities of practice*** Brainstorming Suggestion schemes	***Brainstorming*** ***Communities of practice*** ***Data warehousing*** ***Decision support systems*** ***Knowledge workshops*** ***Learning by doing*** ***Networking*** Data mining Scenario planning Suggestion schemes	***Best practices*** ***Brainstorming*** ***Expert directories*** ***Knowledge workshops*** ***Learning by doing*** ***Mentorship programmes*** ***Networking*** ***Scenario planning*** Communities of practice Suggestion schemes Benchmarking	***Brainstorming*** ***Networking*** ***Knowledge repositories*** ***Knowledge workshops*** ***Scenario planning*** ***Storytelling*** Mentorshipprogrammes Suggestion schemes
Knowledge Codification and Discovery	***Expert directories*** Knowledge maps Knowledge repositories	***Communities of practice **** ***Data warehousing **** ***Decision support systems **** ***Knowledge repositories **** Data mining * Knowledge maps	***Expert directories **** ***Knowledge maps*** ***Knowledge repositories*** Communities of practice * Suggestion schemes	***Brainstorming **** ***Knowledge repositories ****
Knowledge Sharing and Collaboration	***Communities of practice **** ***Expert directories **** ***Knowledge workshops*** ***Learning by doing*** ***Networking*** ***Storytelling*** Benchmarking Best practices knowledge Mentorship programmes	***Benchmarking*** ***Communities of practice **** ***Data warehousing **** ***Decision support systems **** ***Expert directories*** ***Knowledge repositories **** ***Knowledge workshops **** ***Learning by doing **** ***Networking **** Best practices Data mining *	***Best practices **** ***Brainstorming **** ***Expert directories **** ***Knowledge maps **** ***Knowledge repositories **** ***Knowledge workshops **** ***Learning by doing **** ***Mentorship programmes **** ***Networking ****	***Brainstorming **** ***Knowledge workshops **** ***Learning by doing*** ***Networking*** ***Scenario planning **** ***Storytelling **** Expert directories Mentorship programmes * Suggestion schemes *

	Repositories Suggestion schemes *	Mentorship programmes Storytelling Suggestion schemes *	Benchmarking * Communities of practice * Storytelling Suggestion schemes *	
Most Popular Enabling Technologies	Bulletin boards Groupware Intranet	Groupware Intranet Ontology tools Web-based file sharing tools	Bulletin boards E-learning Groupware Intelligent agents Intranet Ontology tools Web-based file sharing tools Workflow management Tele- and video-conferencing software	E-learning Groupware Tele- and video-conferencing software Web-based file sharing tools
Attitude to KM	• KM has not been formally implemented and is not always considered as being important.	• KM has been departmentalized	• KM is embedded in business processes	• KM is everyone's responsibility, and the organization is dependent on the implementation of KM
Cultural Obstacles	• Lack of management commitment	• Lack of trust • Role power plays • Lack of employee buy-in	• Usage of KM techniques and technologies not always regarded as 'productive time'	

5.1 Power-driven culture

A small entrepreneurial organization, where personal relationships and fast decision-making played an important part, was selected for the power-driven culture sample. Although the management of this organization supported the deployment of KM techniques and technologies to some extent, KM *per se* was not formally implemented.

Since knowledge sharing and collaboration were regarded as being vital to this organization's existence, the power-driven culture relied much more on making use of KM techniques and technologies to encourage knowledge sharing as opposed to the creation and codifying of knowledge. Table 5 illustrates how this organization deployed KM techniques and technologies that are traditionally used to create or discover and codify knowledge to further knowledge sharing.

The employees of the power-driven organization made use of the entire spectrum of KM techniques and technologies that were supported by their management. However, KM techniques and technologies that were not actively encouraged by management were not deployed effectively. This could be illustrated in line with attempts to implement suggestion schemes and knowledge maps. While management encouraged employees to come up with suggestions, the suggestions offered were rarely implemented. In the case of knowledge maps, although they existed, they were not used, mainly because they were outdated and management did not make any effort to revise them.

Networking played a very important role in this organization and was strengthened by making use of KM techniques and technologies such as storytelling, communities of practice, the corporate grapevine, expert directories, learning by doing and knowledge workshops. The enabling technologies that were mostly used to support the aforementioned KM techniques and technologies included bulletin boards, groupware and the intranet.

5.2 Role-driven culture

The role-driven culture sample was derived from a large, bureaucratic organization. This organization corresponded to Handy's (2000:23–27) role-driven classification, in that specific roles were allocated to individuals and power and authority evidently correlated with the organizational chart. In addition, this organization had many rules and regulations and emphasized long-term careers.

In the role-driven culture, KM was regarded as being the 'possession' of one specific department. This department was also primarily responsible for rolling out KM techniques and technologies to the rest of the organization. Employees in this organization perceived this department, together with management, as being very prescriptive and did not always use the deployed KM techniques and technologies extensively, mainly owing to a lack of buy-in. As a result some of the KM techniques and technologies deployed were used only because management insisted that employees make use thereof. Other reasons why employees in the role-driven culture refrained from using some of the available KM techniques and technologies included a lack of trust and role power play. This caused employees to be very cautious as to what knowledge they would share and with whom.

Although the role-driven culture mainly applied the deployed KM techniques and technologies to collaborate and share knowledge, these were also used extensively for the creation and codification of knowledge (Table 5). Of the wide selection of KM techniques and technologies that the role-driven culture made available to its employees, the KM techniques and technologies that were most frequently used included networking, knowledge workshops, brainstorming, communities of practice, learning by doing, knowledge repositories, data warehouses, expert directories, decision support systems and benchmarking. Ontology tools, groupware, Web-based file sharing tools and the intranet accounted for the most popular enabling technologies used by this culture.

5.3 Task-driven culture

A consultancy organization served as the task-driven culture sample. In this organization individuals were regarded as experts in their respective fields of work, and often worked together in various teams to accomplish their tasks (Handy 2000:27–31).

The task-driven culture aimed to ensure that *'every employee knew what every employee knows'*. KM was regarded as an integral part of their business and they aimed to embed KM in their business processes. The layout of the building in which they were situated was designed with the intention to facilitate collaboration and to enhance knowledge sharing between employees. Since this organization held every department responsible for the facilitation of KM, certain 'pockets of success', where KM flourished, existed within this culture.

Employees in the task-driven culture tended to use KM techniques and technologies that were supported by management actively. However, KM techniques and technologies that were not supported by management or that were not regarded as 'productive time' (such as participating in communities of practice) were less extensively used.

Although KM techniques and technologies were mainly used to share knowledge in the task-driven culture, knowledge creation and codification techniques and technologies were also extensively implemented. The KM techniques that were commonly used in this organization included networking, knowledge workshops, mentorship programmes, learning by doing, expert directories, knowledge repositories, best practices, scenario planning and knowledge maps.

The most accepted enabling technologies implemented by the task-driven culture included the intranet, groupware, bulletin boards, Web-based file sharing tools, intelligent agents, tele- and video-conferencing software, e-learning, workflow management and ontology tools.

5.4 Character-driven culture

The character-driven sample was obtained from a small, dynamic organization, comprising mainly independent, professional specialists. This organization emphasized the role of the professional individual (Handy 2000:31–35) and regarded KM as being everyone's responsibility.

Although KM *per se* was not formally implemented, knowledge sharing was regarded as being fundamental to this organization's existence. Interpersonal KM techniques were frequently used, mainly because of the small size of the organization and the prominence placed upon the individual. The employees within the character-driven culture did not perceive management as being prescriptive regarding the implementation of the available KM techniques and technologies. Instead, mutual understanding existed between management and the employees, resulting in buy-in and effective use of the existing KM techniques and technologies.

The KM techniques and technologies deployed in the character-driven organization were primarily used for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation, rather than the codification of knowledge. Corresponding to the fact that the character-driven culture emphasized the individual, rather than technology, the KM techniques most frequently employed included storytelling, networking, knowledge workshops, brainstorming, learning by doing, scenario planning and knowledge repositories. Although expert directories did exist in this organization, they were not frequently used, owing to the assumption that the organization was very small and people shared knowledge so often that everyone knew who the experts in particular areas were.

Groupware, Web-based file sharing tools, e-learning and tele- and video-conferencing software accounted for the most commonly deployed enabling technologies in this organization.

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6 Conclusion

Just as there are different categories of KM techniques and technologies, there are different types of corporate cultures. These cultures vary in terms of their attitudes towards KM and the cultural obstacles they experience regarding the successful deployment of the selected techniques and technologies. When examining Table 5, it becomes evident that some KM techniques and technologies were employed for different purposes in the respective cultures. For example, although both the power-driven and the role-driven culture made use of 'expert directories', the power-driven culture preferred to use this technique to codify and discover knowledge, whereas the role-driven culture chose to employ this technique mainly to further the collaboration and sharing of knowledge within the organization.

Table 6 is a summary of the number of KM techniques and technologies that were used in the cultures examined (as illustrated in Table 5), indicating for what purpose they were mainly deployed and to what extent.

Table 6 Extent of the usage of KM techniques and technologies

		Knowledge creation		**Knowledge codification and discovery**		**Knowledge sharing and collaboration**		**Total KM techniques and technologies used**		**Level of operational usage**
Extent of usage		**Greater**	Lesser	**Greater**	Lesser	**Greater**	Lesser	**Greater**	Lesser	
Culture	**Power-driven**	**1**	2	**1**	2	**6**	5	**6**	8	43%
	Role-driven	**7**	3	**4**	2	**9**	5	**9**	7	56%
	Task-driven	**8**	3	**3**	2	**9**	4	**10**	5	67%
	Character-									

	driven	**6**	2	**2**	0	**6**	3	**8**	3	73%

When examining Table 6, it becomes clear that all the examined cultures accentuated the use of knowledge collaboration and sharing techniques and technologies. This correlates with the observation of Von Krogh *et al.* (2000:261–262) that the main objective regarding KM in organizations is to share experiences and best practices to achieve a competitive advantage and avoid the duplication of knowledge creation.

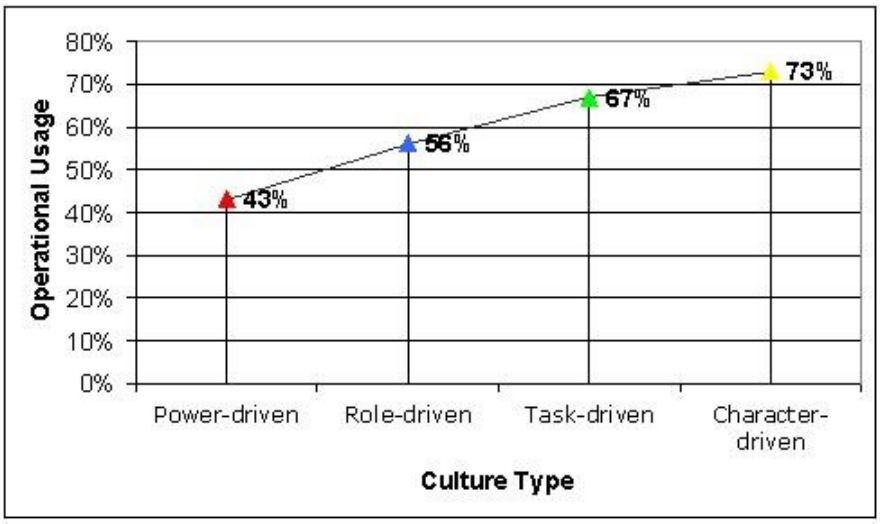
Compared to the other cultures examined, the power-driven culture appeared to make the least extensive use of knowledge codification techniques and technologies. This observation correlates with Handy's (2000:21) claim that power-driven cultures 'are very short on documentation'.

Although the role-driven culture had access to an extensive number of KM techniques and technologies, its level of operational usage of these techniques and technologies was only 56%. This could be attributed to the fact that although employees were not always convinced to employ certain KM techniques and technologies, they did use these to some extent because management expected them to do so. Handy's (2000:23–25) and Ladd and Heminger's (2002) observations that role-driven cultures are essentially bureaucratic, emphasizing rules and regulations, support this contention.

The role-driven, task-driven and character-driven cultures put much more emphasis on the usage of techniques and technologies that facilitate knowledge creation, than the power-driven culture. This reflection correlates with Handy's (2000:20–22) assertion that power-driven cultures are essentially dictatorial, leaving little room for creativity. Handy (2000:28, 32) also maintains that creativity is dominant in task-driven cultures and that character-driven cultures accentuate individual development and personal growth. This argument also affirms Ladd and Heminger's (2002) contention that task-driven as well as character-driven cultures emphasize innovation.

Although the number of KM techniques and technologies used per culture was dominated by the role- and task-driven cultures, it was the character-driven culture that used its deployed KM techniques and technologies to the greatest extent. This claim is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Operational usage of KM techniques and technologies per culture



When examining Figure 1, it appears that there is a correlation between the extent of the use of KM techniques and technologies and the type of corporate culture.

When comparing the number of KM techniques and technologies deployed in the respective cultures with the operational usage thereof, one can contend that the mere availability of KM techniques and technologies in organizations will not necessarily lead to employees making active use thereof.

One could therefore conclude that KM is approached differently in each of the identified cultures and that those KM techniques and technologies that are successfully implemented in one organization might

fail in another, owing to the influence that corporate culture has on the extent to which these techniques and technologies are used.

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