

# CONFRONTING CULTURAL BARRIERS TO KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT USING A DISTINCTIVE CZECH CULTURAL MODEL

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## Abstract

This discussion utilises a cultural model distinctive to the Czech reality depicting how, within the research framework, the culture influences Knowledge Management, its deployment, and subsequent barriers to implementation. Although Hofstede's cultural dimensions served as an earlier benchmark for this argument, deeper research now permits a stand-alone model unique to Czech national culture. It centres on previous examinations that provide a working definition of the Czech management style in both theory and practice as foundation.

Although many of the barriers to successful Knowledge Management are consistent across all cultures, reasons associated with culture are of a particular significance in this case. The attribute of 'Czechness' as the independent variable motivates general acceptance of what to many may consider as management fads or practices 'not made here'. As part of the on-going discussion on Czech culture, the authors re-introduce the notion of Švejk as the primary factor relative to Czech creativity and innovation and in general, the Czech management style in practice.

Two different but complementary studies are conducted facilitated through self-administered questionnaires. Whereas the first centres on Knowledge Management perceptions in the workplace, the second concentrates on KM views in academia.

**Key words:** Czech Republic, Knowledge Management, national culture

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## 1 Introduction

Individual and social barriers often prevent effective knowledge sharing and transfer. It is therefore necessary to identify and eliminate the maximal number of these barriers. Some of them are possible to remove completely through a deep comprehension of their cultural

origins. Others however, will continue to exist. It is necessary to minimise those that remain given their relationship to specific perceptions. One of these obstacles is the conflict of motives that arise from Knowledge Management (KM) processes especially within knowledge sharing. It is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural system. In motivational conflicts, it is possible to identify the interconnectivity of the barriers. To confront individual and social barriers tools and techniques such as, narrative, expressive communication, trust, Human Resource Management, team work, a balanced usage of codification and personalisation approaches, workplace design and organisation of workplaces are consulted. Insufficient knowledge sharing, which is often not realised, is the individual conflict of these motives (Bureš, 2003). In other words, culture is a principal determinant to success.

The unique sense of Czech bureaucracy and the Czech adaptive attitude impede the normalisation of KM as an integral part of life. Čech and Bureš (2007) describe the 'traditional nature' of Czech universities as an obstacle to KM. Experience shows that the process from the decision-making stage to actual implementation is lengthy and creates additional delays to successful KM deployment. In addition, Bureš (2003) identifies a number of cultural barriers to Knowledge Sharing (KS) although applicable to enterprise are also prevalent within an academic setting. A conflict of motives based on the assumptions that most individuals perceive KS as "negative, unpleasant, or undesirable" that in turn produces conflict. Significantly, once the student leaves the academic environment, these negative perceptions continue into the commercial segment.

## **2 Czech knowledge management experience**

With the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the EU promotes KM as a principal component of its infrastructure. Likewise, the Czech Republic through its many publications emphasises the role that the country should assume as a KM leader in this century. Whether or not the government follows through with its rhetoric does not play part to this tract but is worthy of further research. There is often an overt emphasis on the technological side of KM. Though not the reason of its origin or importance, one should not ignore that modern technologies catalyse many changes. Recognising the many roadblocks to successful KM implementation, the Faculty of Informatics and Management at the Univerzita Hradec Králové (UHK) developed a phase based methodology designed specifically for the Czech Republic to assist with the implementation process. The method is known as *KM-BeAt-It* that "provides a momentum for change" through its repetitive usage and on-going process

improvement cycles (Bureš & Brunet-Thornton, 2009). The name of the programme in English is open to interpretation and may be read as an open invitation to ‘be at it’ as in an active participation or as a suggestion to remove cultural inhibitions or hesitancy as in ‘beat it’.

To gauge the state of KM in the Czech Republic, a study conducted in 2012 substantiates the premise that Czechs familiar with the concepts of KM hold a negative view (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) whereas those not acquainted, believe that KM is yet another management fad. Highlights from the respondents (n=93) follow.

KM remains a practice followed or acknowledged by an intimate minority (38%). Within the latter, a substantial portion stems from multinational enterprises, consulting firms, and government. There is a lack of ‘knowledge’ of the principles associated with KM or a general disinterest. Owner and/or board level are the promoters (48.8%) and often concentrate on the IT level (34.5%). There is a tendency to believe that all business units benefit from a KM programme, HR and Sales benefit the most. There remains the question however, that based on the definitions of KM, knowledge sharing, knowledge transfer (KT) supplied as part of the preface to the self-administered questionnaire, due to the lack of an overall appreciation of KM many respondents assume a global benefit entailing the involvement of all. There is no time for KM (81.5%) resounds throughout the results. The lack of funding (48.1%) followed by information overload impede any implementation.

Despite the low level of KM familiarity, the assumption is that the definitions contained in the preface are useful. The surveyed individuals attribute the following qualities.

**Tab. 1: SAQ Results**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Significance</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Employee development	High	25.9
Improving innovation	Medium	25.9
Revenue growth	Medium	24.7
Improving customer service	Medium	24.7
Cost reduction	Medium	28.8
Improving competitive advantage	Medium	23.8
Profit growth	Medium	37.5

Source: Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2013a,b

Although the representation is relatively low, they do encompass all respondents. As to KM-related technologies implemented, e-mail and internet are the most popular followed by intranet and portals. They are also the most frequent whereas, those designated as least popular are the lack of facilities and eLearning. Most systems are not expressly technology based for a KM implementation and use existing infrastructure. Given that only 38% of respondents claim to have a KM programme in place, it is not surprising that over 60% claim to have no idea as to when other KM related activities are planned. Likewise 58.8% respond in the same fashion as to what improvements, if any, are scheduled. Two-thirds indicate that there is no relationship between the importance of KM and the achievement of goals within their organisation. Once again, this includes those that currently possess a KM programme.

Central to this discussion are the answers contributed as personal views by the respondents:

- Only 27.5% disagree or strongly disagree that sharing knowledge reduces job security;
- Eighty-one per cent strongly or moderately agree that knowledge is power in the workplace;
- 61.3% strongly or moderately agree that there is no need for KM wherein one works in a team;
- Sixty-nine per cent agree that KM is a foreign concept and is not applicable to the Czech Republic;
- 67.6% strongly or moderately agree that KM is another management fad doomed to extinction whereas, 46.3% strongly or moderately disagree with the statement that KM is something done with computers.

The study does however; demonstrate that KM programmes are prevalent in larger enterprises, often affiliates or subsidiaries of multinationals. Those not working in a KM environment believe that such a programme is an asset to their organisation. Most have not considered a programme whereas; those that have are in the process of establishing. Overall survey results conclude that the state of KM in Czechia is either in its infancy or in a state of dormancy waiting for recognition. Despite the claims and promises of the Czech government (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012), KM remains relatively unknown. Even from those familiar with the concept, the initial impetus to deploy a KM programme, originates from board level suggesting that the process is imposed from headquarters. IT and HR are the two enterprise divisions that contribute to implementation indicative that these entities have or envision the

most to gain. The obstacles identified to KM implementation are standard: no time to share, information overload, and an unwillingness to share (Bureš, 2003). Girard and Allison (2008) propose that information overload leads to information anxiety. Even from within the usual scope of KM benefits, the often-cited increased revenues, customer service, and reduced costs attract medium to neutral appeal from the respondents. Intranet and e-mail account for the highest success rates in technology. This statistic is worrisome in that the European Commission (2011) claims that the Czech utilisation is below the EU average. Issues relative to those who deploy tools other than the two most frequent such as document management, and decision support, may be related to a lack of training and principally that the application and support documentation is in a language other than Czech without a suitable translation. The majority of respondents, when queried, claim that they have access to Internet and e-mail only.

The research indicates that lip service is paid even in the instances where KM exists. There is a lack of an overall plan in the development once implemented. Most surveyed attest that they have no idea what is to become of their programme or of KM. Ultimately, the organisation does not demonstrate the relationship between the importance of KM and the achievement of organisational goals. In sum, this demonstrates that KM as a concept let alone a practice remains relatively unknown within Czech business circles.

The personal views collected reinforce the obstacles through the acclamation that knowledge equates to power and reduces job security. Opinion also reflects the notions that KM is a management fad (67.6%) and is something that a computer does (46.3%).

### **3 Knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer in selected czech universities**

In parallel with the SAQ distributed to active participants within the Czech business sector, a similar instrument was distributed to students, faculty, and staff of five state institutions of higher learning (n=66).

Respondents are evenly split (42.9%) between those who agree and disagree as to whether or not the universities' KS and KT methods are effective. However, adding the corresponding number of responses of those who strongly disagree or strongly agree this shifts the balance to those who disagree with the statement by 7.1%. Therefore, fifty per cent do not believe that the existing KS and KT methods are effective.

When asked if they are encouraged to share knowledge and information in their academic environment, fifty per cent do not agree. Forty-three per cent question the practical nature of the knowledge and claim that it is theoretical based. There is agreement (33.9%) in the notion that improving the existing university information technology (IT) systems will in turn augment KS efficiency. Forty-two per cent of respondents validate the latter statement and claim that the existing IT is inadequate for efficient KS and KT. The resident systems lack the appropriate KM applications that provide the necessary dynamism and impetus to track knowledge needs, present and future (42.9%). Oliver et al (2003) discuss some of the challenges involved in the use of KM methods and tools in a university environment. These include using the right technology to link all stakeholders to a system that is interactive but is smart and real time. There is an unequivocal need for trust and curiosity. Above all, it is recommended “rather than waiting for KM to be adopted, perhaps as a management fad or with a technology emphasis, the informal tactics practised centre on using small internal Communities of Practice...” (ibid. 2003:143).

However, even with an improved IT infrastructure, one-third would not participate more in discussions and idea sharing. This leads one to believe that the environment is not conducive to KS and KT. Results indicate that there is a general lack of motivation through feedback and encouragement. Forty-eight per cent of respondents are not motivated and the same number feels that peers, professors (in this case students), and advisors (in both cases) do not provide feedback and encouragement to share knowledge during lectures and discussions. There is a lack of motivation to develop new ideas (46.4%) as new ideas are not accepted at the university (51.8%). One possible remedy (51.8%) is for the universities to adopt a proactive position towards KS. However, as if to compensate for this lack, (35.7%) engage in informal discussions on academic issues.

Privacy issues are a barrier. Only forty-two per cent do not have an issue with privacy in the sharing of knowledge. Whereas, 43.6% claim that their contributions to a knowledge repository would not threaten their privacy.

Although privacy is not an issue, 47.3% do not feel compelled to share ideas with others due to the existing KS culture or lack thereof. Forty-four per cent trust the accuracy and truthfulness of the knowledge shared. In the same context, forty-nine per cent worry that their ideas are at risk of plagiarism. Despite these indices, 67.3% feel that KS decreases competitiveness. A combined eighty-eight per cent share with those with whom a personal relationship exists.

In a university setting, members express and share knowledge. The latter may also determine the level of candidness in sharing (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In view of the perceived lack of motivation and encouragement to transfer and share knowledge, sixty-four per cent cite rewards as a possible incentive. With the increase of the number of courses available in languages other than Czech, issues arise depending on the individual level of competency and fluency in that language. 41.8% of respondents claim that linguistic barriers diminish their KS skills.

Recognising that the audience is academic-focused in a university environment wherein KM courses are offered, 41.8% cite that it is a foreign concept not suitable for conditions in the Czech Republic.

Students demonstrate dissatisfaction with their universities' methods of KS and KT. This for a number of reasons but primarily they claim that their academic environment does not promote or provide sufficiently a forum to share new ideas. There is agreement that the course content deals with theory and lacks practicality needed in today's competitive market.

As for the technology used for KM purposes, a more dynamic platform is needed however; this will not increase KS and/or KT participation. This result indicates the existence of another malaise of greater importance. Learning for this generation of students is not confined to textbooks and lectures. Their experience is multimedia driven and often hands-on through strategy-based video games. They travel and converse with friends from around the world on Facebook and Skype. Their world is not limited to the fenced-in borders of Czechoslovakia. Brelade and Harman (2000) suggest that KM changes the role of the manager from a controller to one of facilitator. To a large degree, KM transforms the role of educator to facilitator as well. "Moreover, in the Knowledge Economy students need to learn how to learn and how to manage their own learning, which amounts to a new form of curriculum designed to support 'lifelong learning'" (OECD, 2000:37)

University members do share and transfer knowledge but only within select groups. They anticipate a more practical position from their administrators to lead by example in sharing. There lacks suitable rewards programmes. The necessary dynamics are lacking. Their existence is imperative before they view both the quality and nature of the knowledge content as adequate. Although new ideas and methods are abundant, the students remain reluctant to share. The lack of recognition reinforces this reluctance. Although privacy issues are not an obstacle to KS, distrust of knowledge sources, loss of competitiveness, the

possibility of plagiarism, and the lack of rewards remain barriers. “Trust lubricates cooperation and cooperation breeds trust” (Ghoshal & Nahapiet, 1998:252).

#### **4 Czech cultural impact**

Earlier research on Czech cultural values (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012) produces a model that identifies the sense of Švejk as a positive and prevalent aspect of the Czech mentality. It stimulates creativity and innovation that is spontaneous to meet the circumstances at hand. It entails a sense of ‘Czechness’ fuelled by the need to surpass historical imitations often created by overpowering ideologies forced upon the national psyche.

KM imports with it a sense of foreignness and ‘not made here’. The majority of the literature is in English and carries with it examples of foreign multinationals. There are few instances of case studies relative to small and medium sized businesses. In addition, most literature available in Czech cites the same studies and cases often based on the same out-of-country models. There is a predominant notion of knowledge equating to power that is particular to the Czech Republic. After successive oppressive regimes in which knowledge is restricted to a select few, there remains a sense of ownership that knowledge, although no longer restricted to an elite, fetches rewards. The latter in turn converts to material goods, and prestige. The lack of time to share reflects heavily on the Czech concept of time and in general, organisational sense. Other more pressing issues or circumstances, often replace current priorities. KM does not appeal to the Švejk nature of the business Czech (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012). To the Czech mentality, KM is a formalisation of what is already being accomplished and thus, adds another formality to the workday. It hinders the Czech sense of innovation that depends on the circumstances. KM also threatens the cultural aspect of experts and specialists. Sharing democratises knowledge and renders an equal standing to all who hold it. To the shop owner or the small business proprietor, a KM system adds to an already overburdened bureaucracy. KS is a hands-on experience, especially tacit knowledge that one acquires through trial and error.

There is a remarked difference between the students who marched for freedom on Václavské náměstí in 1989 with those of today. There are no national heroes to emulate such as Jan Palach or Václav Havel. The process of ‘Euro-americanisation’ has not left Czech students insensitive but rather blissfully ignorant of the past.

This together with what may be termed, a generational gap, enforces the in/out group syndrome. Consistent with the lack of respect and trust for national authority figures and in



view of recent plagiarism scandals in which authors ‘borrowed’ student work for publication, students may harbour the same sentiments for professors.

In the aim to facilitate learning, many textbooks are translated from the English language original often with commentary from the Czech author. Unless the author is fully fluent with the topic and the language, the quality of the material suffers from the lack of a culture-specific transfer.

The unique sense of Czech bureaucracy and the Švejk adaptive attitude impede the normalisation of KM as an integral part of university life. Bureš (2003) identifies a number of cultural barriers to KS although applicable to enterprise is also one prevalent within an academic setting, a conflict of motives based on one of the assumptions that most individuals perceive KS as “negative, unpleasant, or undesirable” that in turn produces conflict.

Although many students enrol in KM courses, there is speculation as to why the majority consider it as a management fad not applicable to the Czech Republic. One possible reason is that foreign consultancy firms advertise KM as part of their portfolio. Another possibility is that KM is not envisioned as a practicable tool within the Czech system.

“It is no secret that knowledge is power. A frequent management complaint about implementing KM has been that some employees resist sharing their knowledge out of the fear the company will replace them.” (Ghoshal & Nahapiet, 1998)

In order to activate its commitments, the government must transfer KM from the academics to the workers. Most Czech universities offer a selection of KM courses. The question remains if this meta-knowledge is in turn transmitted publically to others once the former students become owners, managers, or leaders of industry.

A method such as *KM-BeAt-It* is of course helpful. However, there is an evident lack of even a basic appreciation within the general population. From the survey, a reasonably high percentage assumes that KM is something a computer does. Government programmes in the form of basic training initiatives could then benefit from an implementation programme as developed by the UHK once the basics are introduced.

In order to change the model, Czech success stories and actual implementations are documented and constitute ‘native’ artefacts. There is a need to introduce stories made here. KM ownership becomes an issue of national pride overriding goals of other EU nations. A rationalisation of KM from a Czech perspective is required starting with a more realistic presentation of case studies concentrating on small and medium sized enterprises. There is need for a national product in the Czech Republic that complements the UHK initiative and

includes a series of managerial products (artefacts) that comprise user guides, templates and explanatory notes in Czech. If it is to become a plausible asset to the Czech Republic, it must be simplified to connect with daily activities often taken for granted.

## 5 Conclusion

The Czech cultural values identify that the sense of Švejk is still a predominant factor in the Czech psyche (Brunet-Thornton & Bureš, 2012). This becomes further complicated in a period of economic turmoil with a rebirth of conservative values, high corruption, and a return to “Czechness”.

KM is a foreign concept complete with its case studies of the larger enterprises such as GM, British Telecom, and IBM. There is little Czech content or is there substance in which the Czech entrepreneur may acknowledge a tangible association. KM requires interaction with colleagues and subordinates that entails additional work. A shift in responsibilities and the democratisation of knowledge are contrary to the ideologies and practice of doing business in the Czech Republic.

The findings of this research establish the association of foreignness with KM. Consequently, this lack of ‘Czechness’ deters from successful implementation.

There is an evident benefit of a successful deployment of KM methods and tools at a university permitting KS, improving teaching, and research partnerships as well as the relationships between the administration, faculty, and students (Mikulecký, 2003). However, to reap and realise these benefits, a change in attitude and praxis is required. This shift requires time, efforts and financial resources. Some undertakings are underway. Many universities enter into partnerships with enterprise that specialise in Project Management, business advisory and consultancy, and finance. Subject Matter Experts are frequently invited for guest lectures and sponsorship. Exchange programmes with universities across the world provide students with an alternative view of learning while gaining valuable life skills abroad. The ownership of learning is reassigned to the students as rightful owners. The role of educator becomes one of an advisory nature. The university becomes a learning organisation rather than an organisation of learning.

The move towards effective KS and KT need not be grandiose. Oliver et al (2003) suggest simple Communities of Practice. At university, knowledge working groups based on subject matter or faculty start the process until the entire environment becomes active.

Lastly, a reflection on the educators' mandate: "the cultural functions of teaching and research have been the primary functions of universities, whereas the human capital function of preparing trained persons has played a secondary role" (Kok, 2007:184).

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