

## **Cross-cultural Diversity in the Knowledge Management Concepts of 20-21st Centuries within the Framework of International Dialogue for Creation of a New Model of Knowledge Management**

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### **Abstract**

In this article various perceptions of Knowledge Management (KM) in cross-cultural aspects are explored. Cross-cultural similarities and differences between American, Japanese, European, Chinese and Russian KM approaches are represented in a table where the following distinctive features are considered: mission, mentality, ideal type and embodiment of knowledge, mechanism, objective, strategy, process, means and metaphor of KM. After studying interconnections between all approaches we will have an opportunity for better understanding the versatility of the KM science development. At present Russia is searching for its own way to managing knowledge. And Knowledge Management will be developing further everywhere in the world, including Russia, and will not be considered as a universal concept of isolated models and approaches, but rather as interaction of all existing models. Studying Geography of cross-cultural differences allows us to see *the sharp angles* of possible conflicts and contradictions in the World of humans. Russia needs the KM model that could interact with all existing models not only for better integration into the world knowledge economy, but also for the survival of the humankind.

**Key Words:** context, style of KM, culture, diversity, universality.

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The world of humans absorbs knowledge from various fields of activity. The knowledge is gathered, stored and transferred to next generations.

Knowledge management (KM) which is defined as a free set of ideas and views, methods and instruments aimed at creating, using and transferring knowledge, has recently become very popular in the context of various disciplines and branches of industry all around the world. KM is likely to become “the most universal management concept in history”.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores distinctive features of various approaches to KM in cross-cultural aspects.

At the end of the 1990s an American scientist D.Cohen wrote that “the most useful context for knowledge is not one clear theory, but a fabric of

ideas”, each enriched and textured by its contrast and connection with the others which “bring different patterns of understanding and approaches to light”.<sup>2</sup> We will explore a cross-cultural context, from which it is easier for scholars and practitioners to get information and to use all the variety of KM approaches appearing in various cultural traditions. D.Cohen studied American and Japanese approaches. The Chinese approach was described by Z.Zhu.<sup>3</sup> In our article we will research the peculiarities of Russian KM approach in order to make the picture of similarities and differences more complete. In order to broaden the research we will add up the Russian approach that could be called “Eurasian” to those of the “East” and “West”.

Cross-cultural similarities and differences between American, Japanese, European, Chinese and Russian KM approaches are represented in Table 1 where the following distinctive features are considered: mission, mentality, ideal type and embodiment of knowledge, mechanism, objective, strategy, process, means and metaphor of KM.

Let us analyze various KM approaches.

American approach is based on the idea that knowledge, capital and labor are the strategic sources of sustainable competitive advantage for companies, branches of industry<sup>4</sup> and for the whole nations.<sup>5</sup> In the USA the main practical KM issues are collection, distribution, re-use and measurement of already existing “explicit” (encoded) knowledge and information, i.e. formation and use of the knowledge database. Practitioners study information systems as a means of explicit knowledge collection and distribution; companies measure the KM success, which is expressed by the size of profit from investments into knowledge.<sup>6</sup> KM is formed in market conditions, with the use of market notions and terms, and the main workload is carried out by Knowledge Manager and his subordinates. The role of an individual is highly emphasized. American scholar R.Cole called this “American competitive individualism”.<sup>7</sup> In the USA KM is implemented by means of technologies, with the language of economics, while social factors, power and conflicts are not paid much attention to.<sup>8</sup> KM is perceived as a new way of action, a new rational view of instruments and systems, but not that of processes and people.<sup>9</sup> The main feature of the USA knowledge economy is information processing. European and Japanese approaches are totally different.

Table 1.

Cross-cultural similarities and differences between Knowledge Management approaches

Distinctive features of KM approaches	Approaches to KM	
	American	Japanese
Mission	I am successful, therefore I exist	I love, therefore I exist
Mentality	Individualism	Groupism
Ideal type of knowledge	Knowledge-resource	Knowledge-relationship
Embodiment	Knowledge database	Company creating knowledge
KM Mechanism	Knowledge economy	Knowledge culture

Objective	Advantage in the nearest future	Long-term advantage
Focus	Explicit, encoded knowledge	Tacit, subjective knowledge
Strategy	Knowledge re-use	Creativity, transformation
Process	Rationalization	Vision/emotions, Trust/care
Means	Technologies Markets	Socialization
Metaphor	Pick up the fruits that are hanging low	Cultivate "ba"

Table 2 (Continued)

Cross-cultural similarities and differences between Knowledge Management approaches

Distinctive features of KM approaches	Approaches to KM		
	European	Chinese	Russian
Mission	I gain practical experience, therefore I exist	I am learning, therefore I exist	I observe, therefore I exist
Mentality	(De)constructivism	Pragmatism	Dualism
Ideal type of knowledge	Knowledge-power	Knowledge-virtue	Knowledge-innermost
Embodiment	Knowledge agents	Knowledge - life	Knowledge - personal experience
KM Mechanism	Knowledge as a discourse	Management based on knowledge	Being formed

Table 2 (Continued)

Cross-cultural similarities and differences between Knowledge Management approaches

Distinctive features of KM approaches	Approaches to KM		
	European	Chinese	Russian
Objective	Legitimacy	Wisdom	Monitoring results is more important than setting objectives
Focus	Situationally-constructed knowledge	Useful knowledge	Concealed knowledge
Strategy	Politization	Integration	Strategy of reforms, probation
Process	Constructing according to situation	Contextualization	Being formed
Means	Identity/meaning Participation/discussion	WSR model	Being formed
Metaphor	Tell stories	Advantage for the self and the team	"No one is indispensable"

So, in the Japanese approach, unlike in the American one, tacit knowledge, i.e. knowledge embodied in a personal experience of an individual, is considered to be the most precious. The emphasis is on new knowledge creation, which, in the long run, is the main source of innovations. New knowledge creation is a dynamic process where personality is important, therefore, it cannot be managed in a command-and-control manner. On the contrary, new knowledge emerges naturally if a shared context of cognition and action has been created. In Japan this context is called *ba* (in Japanese it means “place”).<sup>10</sup> Individuals are a part of *ba* which brings up commitment, ideal, vision, and also relationships, within which social interaction and creativity take place. Within the frame of *ba* knowledge is created through a series of stages, which represent the transformation processes of tacit knowledge into implicit one and back. These processes are socialization, externalization, combination and internalization (SECI model by I.Nonaka and H.Takeuchi). Transformation of knowledge happens in a spiral manner, up and down from individual to group, to different levels of the organization, resulting in knowledge network in a company. The driving force of *ba*, and this conversion process is the culture of love, trust and care, is “the culture of knowledge” activated in the teaching of a Japanese philosopher Nishida: “I love, therefore I am”.<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning that groupism is the dominating feature of the Japanese mentality, which originates from ancient national traditions.

European approach is based on philosophical ideas of such prominent thinkers as M.Foucault, J.Habermas, M.Heidegger, F. de Sossure, K.Marx and L.Witgenshtein. Knowledge is neither considered to be abstract mental substance, nor personal justified true belief, but rather contesting “stories, versions”.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, knowledge is situated in “the historical, socio-material and cultural context”.<sup>13</sup> Unlike in the American or Japanese approaches, in Europe it is not so much important to divide knowledge into two categories (implicit/explicit). The attention focuses on the fragile, multi-layered, controversial and collective nature of knowledge, i.e. it is presumed that knowledge could have multiple meanings and this is one of the basic statements of deconstructivism. Knowledge and work connected with it are regarded as discourses. Discourse means speech/understanding embodied into a certain communicative situation and therefore, it is a category with distinctive social content.<sup>14</sup> Discourse does not happen in vacuum, it is not easy to be described with the help of complicated technologies, and culture is not always an intermediary. Discourse appears when various levels of power, institutions, mastery and collective knowledge interact. As a result, there is a need for a clear approach to conflict regulation and providing legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> KM is a political discourse, which helps particular groups of agents (possessing knowledge) to legitimate, create strategies and distribute resources.

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Let us consider Chinese approach. Confucius was regarded in China 2000 years ago, and is still regarded, to be a bearer of higher wisdom because he collected, interpreted and distributed knowledge. However, speaking the modern language of KM, the Chinese were too transcendental to recognize the market value of knowledge. "I am learning, therefore I exist". According to the ancient Chinese philosophy, it is willingness and capability to learn that makes a person a human being; and knowledge is one of the main virtues. Although the Confucian tradition has been fairly pragmatic toward knowledge and ways of cognition, until China's recent transformation to a "socialist market economy", cognition was mostly a virtue for gaining wisdom within one's self, that is, for self-cultivation and governing the family, the state.<sup>16</sup>

When the Chinese realized that their old and new competitors all engage in KM in a modern way, they created a new concept *wuli-shili-renli* (WSR), which they say was inherited from Confucius.<sup>17</sup> In this concept three KM aspects coexist - material-technical aspect of managing knowledge *wuhli* (*Wu* in Chinese means "objective existence"), facilitating the constructive-cognitive knowing process *shili* (*Shi* - activity of a human), and governing social-political relations among *knowers* - those endowed with knowledge *renli* (*Re* - relations). The Chinese believe that the best approach to KM is to provide *knowers* with various methods, techniques and skills, create flexible organizational structure, communication opportunities, and then leave the knowing agents to learn, create, share and apply knowledge in the way they feel comfortable.<sup>18</sup> While doing this, the Chinese do not think much of the nature and typology of knowledge. Chinese context of knowledge described by WSR brings equal importance to both technological and institutional dimensions of knowledge and emphasize integration. Chinese scientists are now searching for an integrated approach which could synthesize technology, knowledge of humans and institutional initiatives. The Chinese pay more attention to context and relationship, but not to objects and categories.

In Russian approach. Knowledge Management as a science has just started to attract attention of researchers. Let us consider cross-cultural features of KM in Russia (Table 1).

Traditionally there have been several points of view concerning the types of Russian mentality; they are Westernism, Slavophilism and Eurasianism. The influence of Westernism, which was represented by such thinkers as P. Chaadaev, A. Herzen, V. Belinsky, and others, was especially strong among intelligentsia and entrepreneurs who absorbed certain features of merely Western dispositions (aspiration to freedom, individualism, pragmatism, etc).

Slavophiles (A. Khomiakov, I. Kireevsky, K. Aksakov, and others) thought that Russia had her own way, absolutely different from the Western-European one, its own way of thinking based on its originality, conservatism

and orthodoxy. The basement for this mentality is the social form of economy.

Eurasians do not deny the effect that both West and East have on Russian mentality. From Asia Russia has absorbed the group form of thinking, i.e. “groupism”, and from Europe that of individualism. Groupism and individualism are the two qualities underlying Russian mentality.<sup>19</sup> However, in our country groupism is very different from the Japanese groupism drawing on a high level of discipline, loyalty and dedication.

In Russia verbal communication has a lot of meaning; and only in this kind of communication people transfer, share implicit knowledge, and create new knowledge. Most people prefer to share knowledge orally, i.e. at conferences, meetings, gatherings. Knowledge is considered to be very private, so it is difficult to transfer, because trust culture has not yet developed in Russia.

Shaping the mechanisms and approaches for managing explicit knowledge is also quite complicated due to insufficient development of telecommunication technologies. Another barrier to KM development is preference of short-term results to long-term objectives, which was referred to by a Russian historian and philosopher V.Kluhevsky.<sup>20</sup> This feature contradicts the very strategic meaning of KM, which in the long run implies intellectual potential improvement.

In Russia we are only now in the process of forming the attitude towards a human as a unique source of knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, many people are still acting and thinking in the old manner, with their slogan being “no one is indispensable”. Understanding knowledge as the only resource, with no real alternative, has just started to shape in Russian practice. We are actually in the process of probation of all existing approaches and experience accumulation.

Analyzing similarities and differences between various KM approaches, we can see that in the USA Knowledge Management is supported by technologies, with the help of the language of economy, while social factors, power and conflicts are paid less attention to. In Japan implicit knowledge is emphasized, while technologies act just as means for its transfer and accumulation. The difference between American and European approaches is that in the American style politics, power and conflicts tend to be seen as negative for organizational performance: “What tends to doom projects is fighting over who owns the knowledge, then the project is doomed”.<sup>21</sup> In the European approach such questions are not so important as well as issues of dividing knowledge into implicit and explicit. In China KM approach is centralized and integrated, it synthesizes technologies, human knowledge and institutional initiatives.

At present Russia is searching for its own way to managing knowledge. And Knowledge Management will be developing further

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everywhere in the world, including Russia, and will not be considered as a universal concept of isolated models and approaches, but rather as interaction of all existing models.

A Russian scientist V. Vizgin believes that “knowledge has acquired the nature of the world, as knowledge is able to spontaneously grow in its opportunities”.<sup>22</sup> Russia is a part of the World. As the result of our research we came to the conclusion that the studies of a cross-cultural KM aspect could not only compare various approaches, but also encourage KM strategy development for the future. Studying Geography of cross-cultural differences allows us to see *the sharp angles* of possible conflicts and contradictions in the World of humans. Russia needs the KM model that could interact with all existing models not only for better integration into the world knowledge economy, but also for the survival of the humankind.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> H Takeuchi, ‘Towards a universal management concept of knowledge’. *Managing Industrial Knowledge*, I. Nonaka & D. Teece (eds), Sage, London, 2001, p. 328.

<sup>2</sup> D Cohen, ‘Toward a knowledge context: report on the first annual University of California Berkeley forum on knowledge and the firm’. *California Management Review*, vol. 40, March 1998, pp.30-31.

<sup>3</sup> Z Zhu, ‘Knowledge management: towards a universal concept or cross-cultural contexts?’. *Knowledge Management Research&Practice*, vol. 2, 2004, pp. 67-79.

<sup>4</sup> D Bell, *The coming of post-industrial society*, Basic Books, New York, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> P F Drucker, *Post-capitalist society*, Harper Business, New York, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, p.23.

<sup>7</sup> R E Cole, ‘Learning from the quality movement: what did and didn’t happen and why?’. *California Management Review*, vol. 41, January 1998, pp. 47-73.

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