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**M. Block, T.Ju. Khvatova**

**CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE  
AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING:  
CASE-STUDY OF RUSSIA, GERMANY, FINLAND**

**М. Блок, Т.Ю. Хватова**

**ВЛИЯНИЕ КУЛЬТУРНОГО АСПЕКТА  
НА ОБМЕН ЗНАНИЯМИ В ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ:  
КЕЙС-СТАДИ РОССИИ, ГЕРМАНИИ, ФИНЛЯНДИИ**

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Efficient intra-organisational sharing of resources, especially knowledge, defines the level competitiveness of large organisations. The aim of the article is to take a closer look at cross-cultural aspect as one of the most influencing factors of knowledge sharing and discover the impact of cultural background of employees belonging to different nations – Russia, Germany, Finland. The cultural influence on understanding the role of knowledge and knowledge sharing is investigated.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING. LARGE ORGANIZATIONS. CULTURE.

Конкурентоспособность крупных организаций во многом определяется эффективностью совместного пользования внутренними организационными ресурсами, в частности, знаниями. Цель данной статьи – изучение кросс-культурного аспекта, как одного из основных факторов в процессе обмена знаниями, а также влияния на обмен знаниями культурных особенностей сотрудников, принадлежащих к разным нациям (в центре внимания данной статьи – Россия, Германия, Финляндия). Исследуется также влияние культуры на понимание роли знаний и совместного владения знаниями в организации.

ОБМЕН ЗНАНИЯМИ. КРУПНЫЕ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ. КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ АСПЕКТ.

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*Introduction.* In the «knowledge age», knowledge is recognized as the primary strategic resource of an organisation [1], and those organisations which are able to manage the way how knowledge is shared between employees are believed to gain and sustain their long term competitive advantage [2].

There are many definitions of knowledge and Knowledge Management (KM) in scientific literature. Drucker, for instance, views «knowledge as a utility, knowledge as the means to obtain social and economic results» [1]; Senge defines knowledge as «the capacity for effective action» [3]. Many definitions of knowledge in Knowledge Management theory distinguish between explicit (or codified) knowledge, which is more formal and systematic, and tacit knowledge, which is highly individual, specific to context, and this makes it to be a crucial source of sustainable competitive advantage.

In studying knowledge sharing in an organisation the issue of transferability of

knowledge becomes important. In the literature it is generally argued that explicit knowledge can be transferred easier, because it is codified and formalized. However, the explicit knowledge derives from acquired or held relevant tacit knowledge which in turn is decoded, so that both explicit and tacit knowledge interact. The transferability of knowledge depends on the ability to articulate messages of the involved sharing partners. In addition actors in large organisations possess different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in this article we seek to analyze the importance of individual culture on intra-organisational knowledge sharing process. Studying cultural differences allows seeing possible potentials and contradictions occurring when multinationals work within one organisation.

The term «culture» is characterized by complexity and is defined in many ways. Scholars agree that culture is not static, but rather changes in time (as much as knowledge does). Hofstede distinguishes between the following layers of

culture: symbols, heroes, rituals, values and customs [4]. According to Schein culture has three layers: basic underlying assumptions, espoused values and artefacts [5]. Cultures can be different not only between continents or nations, but also within the same organisation or even family respectively cultural affiliation or cultural identity. This article does not aim at compiling a new definition of culture or identifying cultural dimensions, but at investigating what the cultural influence on organisations is.

Although the relevance of culture is noticed by large organisations and scholars, the effects of cultural aspects on knowledge sharing are still little considered. Further a case-study oriented analysis is carried out for Russia, Finland and Germany. The starting point for the analysis is the cultural-based study of Hofstede (1980) as well as the more recent empirical study conducted by the GLOBE<sup>1</sup> group [6].

The well-known Hofstede's model aims to explain cultural differences and to measure them. Therefore a set of dimensions was defined: Power Distance, Uncertainty avoidance, Individualism, Masculinity and Long Term Orientation in order to obtain values for a specific group of people and culture [4]. The GLOBE study, conducted in the mid 1990's in 951 organisations, in 62 of the world's cultures, aimed to expand Hofstede's study (1980), especially by exploring the impact of culture on leadership [6]. In similar way to Hofstede nine cultural dimensions were developed, of both societal and organisational cultures: Power Distance, Performance Orientation, Assertiveness, Uncertainty Avoidance, Institutional Collectivism, In-Group Collectivism, Future Orientation, Gender Egalitarianism, Human Orientation. A considerable fact about those cultural dimensions is that each one embraces both actual practices («as is») and values («should be»), thus the study's total is 18 dimensions. Below both studies are analysed separately and later on the results are compared.

*Hofstede study.* According to the index of Power Distance Germany (35) and Finland (35) belong to low and Russia (93) to high power distant countries. In other words, in both Germany and Finland the distance between supervisor and subordinates is characterised by lower dependency and emotional distance [7].

Even the flat hierarchy turns more and more into project matrix organisation where teamwork and delegation plays an important role. Ideally, the supervisor acts more as a coach and involves his team members into decision-making process. On the other side, in Russian culture the distance between powers is historically large. Logically, autocratic and patriarchal hierarchies are transferred into organisational context and a person who has authority and takes responsibility is appreciated. The supervisor is all in one: s/he functions as the incubator of ideas, distributor of tasks, controller of the process and results, and the patron of the group interested not only in his team members' performance but also in their lives in general [7].

Germany (65), Finland (59) and especially Russia (95) are likely to avoid uncertainty according to the index of Uncertainty Avoidance, however the ways differ. German culture concentrates on reducing uncertainty by forcing rigid adherence to laws, rules and contracts, and therefore the emphasis lies more on the written word. Similar to Germany the state of Finland provides their citizens a reliable 'safety net' in case of any kind of misfortune in life such in case of illness, unemployment, accidents and bankruptcy. Finnish culture is characterised by law-abiding and universal rules, but also being aware of the relativity of truth and developing their own view on things as well as to be open for changes. Russia is a high-context culture where universal truth does not exist so every situation is treated specifically. It is well-known that Russia developed complex bureaucracy with abundant laws and regulations, but in practice they function only as a guideline, while the emphasis lies more on personal promises.

On the contrary, Russia belongs to a more collectivistic country with an index of 47. It means that belonging to a group offers protection and stability, but requests strong loyalty. Accordingly, individuals' behaviour is determined by group targets supposed by the leader which are valued higher than individual targets. Therefore, in organisational context the emphasis lies more on building up long-term relationships within (important) groups rather than on the task. Consequently, private and working networks become blurred and cannot be treated separately. This more particularistic view allows more flexible and fast decision-making within the group, but

<sup>1</sup> GLOBE is the acronym for «Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness».

factual and rational argumentation can be easily overlooked [8]. Therefore, in order to hold the group together and avoid conflicts a direct communication style about the task and a more indirect communication style is appreciated, especially in expressing own opinion or even critics. Particular attention is given to non-verbal communication and overall (non-)trustworthy impression [8].

In Germany and Finland life and reality are divided into catchable parts, e.g. working time and free time. Logically rational planning of activities and processes as detailed as possible helps to utilise and manage time at best. Therefore in organisational context keeping deadlines and time commitments is very important. On the other hand in Russia reality and truth are understood globally, and thus they are neither universal nor catchable. Therefore, a plan can only function as a guideline which looks good on paper, and deadlines and time commitments can be changed accordingly to the concrete situation.

The index of Masculinity represents the degree of performance-orientation and competitiveness in society [7]. In regard to the explanations above it seems to be conclusive that German culture is circumscribed as highly masculine (66) and Russian culture (40) as low masculine. While in German organisations work-related competition is seen as a driver for efficient and innovative work embedded in a cooperative atmosphere, in Russia performance is traditionally ruled and guarded by the supervisor. Actual work-related competition between workers does not take place, but is replaced by loyalty and keeping harmony in personal relationships within the group. Therefore employees keep knowledge inside [9]. On the contrary, in the international comparison, Finland is one of the most gender equal societies and the most feminine society where autonomy, personal interests and friends are more important than career and work in life. In difference to Germany where competition and performance is stressed, in Finland the focus lies on equality and quality of work and life. Furthermore, while in German culture the strong, the best and the fast is highly appreciated, in Finland the empathy is given to the weak and to the slow.

In Tab. 1 cultural values derived from the Hofstede's study are summarised whereat the values are grouped into the following four

domains: context, face-saving, time-perception, universalistic versus particularistic. This grouping is chosen, because starting points of the cultural influence on knowledge sharing can be drawn from those cultural values.

*GLOBE study.* In Fig. 1a and 1b there are nine cultural dimensions of the GLOBE study measured by answers on a scale of 1 «strongly disagree» over 4 «neither agree nor disagree» to 7 «strongly agree». For a better comparison the cultural actual Practices (P) and cultural Values (V) of Germany, Russia and Finland are separately represented in the following two figures X, Y (House et. al 2004). Actual Practices reflect the «as is» state, i. e. the actual observable behaviour, habits, and customs in the society or organisation. The Values reveal the «should be» or ideal state, i. e. the values actual behaviour is based on and peoples expectation in attaining those values.

Below the nine dimensions for culture developed by the GLOBE group are circumscribed [8] and applied to Germany, Russia and Finland.

a) **Power Distance:** To which extent people expect and are able to tolerate that in their culture the power is not equally distributed, e.g. held by the state government or by the management of companies. Despite all three countries disagree towards power distance as an embedded value with 2.5 and 2.6, in practice a reversal effect can be observed in Germany, in Russia as well as in Finland with indices over 5.

b) **Performance Orientation:** To which extent a culture encourages members of society or organisation to perform better and rewards it accordingly. While in German (6.0), Finland (6.2) as well as in Russian culture (5.5) people strongly agree to the value of seeking best performance, in practice such performance oriented-behaviour is indifferently observable with 4.2, 4.0 and 3.8.

c) **Assertiveness:** To which extent a member of a society or organisation behaves towards others: self-confidently, aggressively or confronts with others. In both Germany and Russia people more disagree to the value of assertiveness. In Russia assertiveness is also less observable in practice whereat in Germany more people agree to assertive behaviour. On the other hand, in Finland people do not emphasize assertiveness and thus, neither agree nor disagree.

Table 1

## Comparison of cultural values of the Hofstede study

	Germany	Russia	Finland
Context			
Emphasis on written word	Quite high	Not so high, but collecting written documents is very important for reporting	Quite high
Adherence to law	Rigid	Flexible	Rigid
Agreement based on personal promises or written word	Written word	More on personal promises	More on written word, but personal promise is also a promise.
Reliance on words or non-verbal communication	Reliance more on words	Reliance more on non-verbal communication	Reliance on words
Face-saving			
Favoured business approach	Content matters; to the point discussion	Polite and respectful, but conflict avoidant	Politeness strategy, but enough direct plan
View of directness and indirectness	Constructive directness is wished; indirectness may cause misunderstanding	Directness may be impolite; indirectness may cause misunderstanding	Too much directness inconsiderate; indirectness may cause misunderstanding
Amount of verbal self-disclosure	Medium till high	Low at organizational level, high on personal level	Low
Vagueness	Not appreciated. In expectation of something promising, risks are taken.	Not appreciated and even avoidance of any uncertainty.	Not appreciated.
Perception of time			
Keeping schedules	Important, must keep on schedules.	Schedules are flexible and can be changed	Must keep on schedules
Keeping time commitments	Demanded	Desired but not always obligatory	Demanded
Attitude to deadline	Important	Deadline is more seen as a guideline	Important
Universalistic vs. Particularistic			
Main focus: on law or relationship	Main focus on law, but also on relationship	Building up long-term relationships or relationships within important groups	Law
One reality or several perspectives	Mostly one reality	The truth is not universal and depends on the point of view	Mostly one reality
Rational arguments or personal approach	Rational arguments	Rational arguments are important, but personal approach sometimes prevails	Rational arguments

d) **Uncertainty Avoidance:** To which extent a member of a society or organisation feels threatened by uncertainty and counts on established social norms and formal practices. While in Finland people do not put emphasis on the value of uncertainty avoidance, in Germany

even more people disagree to uncertainty avoidance as a value (3.3), but in real behaviour in both countries people strongly agree with established uncertainty avoidance mechanisms (5.1 and 5.3). In Russia the situation is different. People agree (5.0) to the value of uncertainty

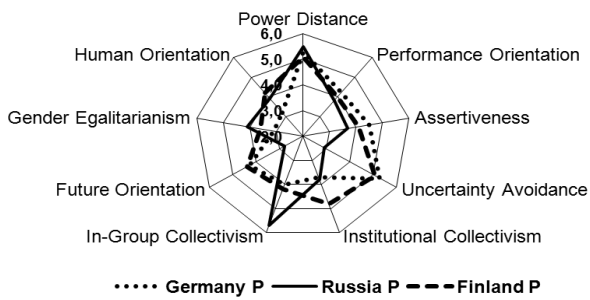


Fig. 1a. Country Scores (Practices) of the GLOBE study.

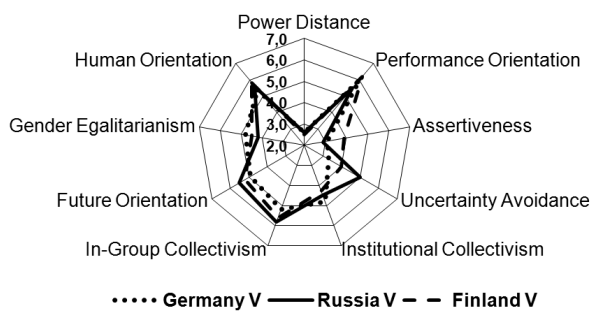


Fig. 1b. GLOBE Country Scores (Values) for Russia, Germany and Finland.

avoidance and underline its importance. Nevertheless the existence of uncertainty avoidant behaviour is disagreed with 2.9.

e) **Institutional Collectivism:** To which extent institutional acts support the distribution of resources. In Germany (4.8), Russia (4.5) as well as in Finland (4.3) people more agree to institutional collectivism as a value. In actual behaviour Russians and Germans neither agree nor disagree, but Finns tend more likely to agree to institutional support in distribution of resources in practice.

f) **In-Group Collectivism:** To which extent people show their loyalty, pride and connectivity towards their culture, e.g. towards their family or organisation. Russians index shows a strong agreement to In-Group Collectivism as a value (5.8) as well as in actual behaviour (5.7). In German culture and in Finnish culture this dimension is also quite highly valued with 5.2 and 5.6, but in real behaviour neither agreement nor disagreement exists.

g) **Future Orientation:** To which extent peoplesr behaviour in the society or organisation is future-oriented, e.g. expressed in form of

planning and investing. In Germany as well as in Finland people agree to future orientation as a value with 4.9 and 5.2 and also (but a bit less) to actual behaviour with 4.3 and 4.4. In Russia future orientation seems to be highly valued with 5.5, in practice there is reversal behaviour observable displayed by the index score of 2.8.

h) **Gender Egalitarianism:** To which extent the society strives for gender egalitarianism in order to reduce gender discrimination. Gender Egalitarianism is in Germany emphasised and agreed as a value (4.8), however, in practice people even more disagree to certain behaviour (3.1). This tendency is similar to Finland, but the difference between value perception (4.5) and actual practice (3.6) is smaller. In Russia people neither agree nor disagree to Gender Egalitarianism as a value as well as in actual behaviour.

i) **Human Orientation:** To which extent a culture (in society, organisation) honours fair, honest, altruistic behaviour. In all three countries Germany (5.4), Russia (5.6) and Finland (5.8) Human Orientation is quite high valued. While in Russian (3.9) and Finnish culture (4.2) peoplesr agreement and disagreement towards human orientation in practice keep the balance, in German culture people are even more likely to disagree (3.2) to human orientation in real behaviour.

*Discussion of the results.* The comparison of the results of the GLOBE study shows that there are negative correlations between culture practices and values for all three countries in the dimensions of Power Distance, Performance Orientation, Uncertainty Avoidance, Human orientation, and only for Russia in Future Orientation. Furthermore, there are negative correlations between Hofstede's and GLOBE's cultural dimensions namely Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Masculinity. In more detail the investigation of Power Distance dimension displays strong contradictions between practices and values in all of those three countries. According to the value indices, for example for Russia, opinions almost completely changed from strong agreement to disagreement in 25 years period (from Hofstede study in 1970 to GLOBE in 1995). On the other hand, in both Hofstede and GLOBE studies people agree that the actual behaviour displays power distance. In Germany and Finland the value of low power distance for both studies is consistent; however, real practices represent strong power

distant behaviour. It leaves the question about the validity of the culture models of those two studies. On the other hand, both models finely reflect the historically shaped features of the three national cultures. So, the contradictive combination of authoritarianism and collectivism, aspiration to unity and tyrannical power in Russia was besides those two studies described in numerous well-known books (for example, in [10]). The historical need for maximal concentration of resources (human, financial, etc.) and collective opposition to numerous dangers predefined the tradition of obeying private interests to the tasks of society. This could possibly bring to the well-known cult of 'leveling' people's in income, standard of living and thinking; it has always been considered to be dangerous to stand out in a crowd and show new ideas, talents, aspirations which is obviously an obstacle to the development of personality and individual abilities. In German and Finnish cultures the focus on the individual is strengthened by historical reason. However, while the 'I-feeling' and striving personal targets lead in Germany to more self-benefit maximisation and competitive and assertive behavior. In Finland personal independence and respect for the autonomy of others are high valued and the kinds of work, the level of education and professionalism are strong indicators of the degree of status in Finnish society.

*Cultural influences on knowledge and knowledge sharing.* In view of knowledge sharing such researchers as for example Holden [11] see a close connection between culture and knowledge. Some scholars argue that sharing knowledge between different cultures is more difficult than within the same culture, because less shared knowledge or rather lack of shared understanding is present. Other scholars give practical recommendations for the knowledge management in international business, e.g. to create intercultural positions, and to raise the awareness that knowledge sharing is also determined by cultural aspects. Furthermore De Long and Fahey [12] underline that culture has impact on the understanding and role of knowledge and how knowledge is shared in organisations. In this article the areas of cultural influence identified in [12] superimposed onto the comparison between Germany, Finland and Russia.

In German and Finnish cultures knowledge is connected to results and therefore to organisational performance. The understanding of knowledge in Russian culture differs strongly. Knowledge is

supposed to be global and abstract, thus not catchable or complete. In consequence any kind of knowledge can be important and collected (just in case), whereat for Germans and Finns knowledge means utilisable, rational, helping to achieve a result so that knowledge which does not directly affect the performance is less considered.

While in Germany knowledge means personal power, in Russia the role of knowledge is undefined. However, while task-oriented knowledge does not mean personal power, relational power does. Consequently, in Germany specialised knowledge is highly valued. Thus the problem of the willingness to share knowledge arises. Some research on management in Russia indicated strong reticence to share knowledge and a tendency to work with whom they are more familiar and to exclude those they consider to be outsiders. Mikhailova and Hutchings [13] found out that in Russia so called «knowledge-sharing hostility» due to strong group affiliation and suspicion for out-group members.

In German culture the emphasis is on written form therefore it is desirable to explicit knowledge also in order to be able to evaluate and store it. In Russia main focus is given to people as carriers of knowledge and oral sharing of knowledge is highly preferred. Speaking about obstacles to knowledge-sharing in international organisations, it is worth mentioning that Russian culture is characterised by high degree of ethnocentricity while deciding who is «belonging to us» or not (manual) which means problems with trust to other ethnicities and of course leads to reducing knowledge sharing to communication only within own clan. Knowledge sharing with foreign colleagues can be also impeded by language problems especially if we consider that Russians prefer verbal communication.

In regard to both empirical studies Hofstede (1980) and GLOBE (2004), Tab. 2 represents a grouping of cultural dimensions and specific criteria for cultural values based on both of these studies. There are five main dimensions of culture (column I in the table): masculinity, learning environment, etc. From these main dimensions, specific cultural criteria referring to knowledge and communication are formulated (column II). As an example, the chosen criteria are used to analyse the influence of German culture on the three proposed knowledge dimensions: understanding of knowledge itself, the role of knowledge [12] and knowledge sharing (columns III–V).

Table 2

**Impact of cultural values on knowledge and knowledge sharing**

Cultural dimensions	Specific criteria of cultural values	Understanding of knowledge itself	Role of knowledge	Knowledge sharing
		Germany		
I	II	III	IV	V
Masculinity	Emphasis on the result	Knowledge is strongly related to its result	Knowledge means valuable resource and is connected with organisational performance	Connection between input (knowledge) and output (reward, result) is important to set. Rewards act as an incentive for knowledge sharing
	Keeping deadlines, commitments	As time, also knowledge can be seen as a valuable resource which can be 'managed'		
	Rewarding performance	Rewards are connected with performance		
Learning environment	Environment to share ideas opinions, criticisms	Knowledge embraces ideas and opponent opinions, constructive criticism	Gaining knowledge means dynamic learning process, knowledge embraces explicit and tacit knowledge	Knowledge sharing opens learning experience; factual and task-oriented knowledge appreciated; language (oral, written) as main sharing medium
	Communication style	Rational and task-oriented argumentation requests low context information; language as main medium, emphasis lies on written form		
	Continuous training and development	Knowledge is complex, therefore demands specialisation; learning by doing		
Uncertainty avoidance	Future-oriented actions	Knowledge is treated as an future investment; it is continuous, but specialised	Knowledge means personal power	Generalised trust into the system reduces uncertainty
	Attitude towards change	Changes are explained, discussed and performed; change can mean chance		
In-Group Collectivism	Teamwork	Individual knowledge as main resource for teamwork; team as medium to solve problems more efficiently	Individuals are carrier of knowledge	Knowledge sharing is a dynamic mutual process of individuals connected by a mission or task
	Face-saving	Constructive criticism is welcome; task-relevant knowledge is centred		
	Shared vision	Shared vision helps for orientation		
Power distance	Supervisor-subordinate relationship	Task-oriented, coach and team	Task-oriented knowledge as main basis for decision-making	Trend to flat hierarchy encourages knowledge sharing
	Decision-making process	Decisions are made by specialists and leader; specialised knowledge is respected		
	Freedom to try things and to do mistakes	Generally valued		

As a result in Germany incentive systems which reward knowledge and knowledge sharing would encourage people to share. In Russia the value of task-oriented knowledge has to be strengthened so that knowledge sharing processes could be more precisely developed e.g. to be

innovative in a certain field. The fear of making and admitting mistakes is hindering knowledge sharing in both contexts. In order to encourage knowledge sharing it is important to break stereotypes and create knowledge sharing culture based on specific individual cultural backgrounds.

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**BLOCK, Madeleine** – *University of Eastern Finland (Kuopio).*

P.O. Box 1627. FI-70211. Yliopistoranta. 1. Kuopio. Finland. E-mail: madeleineblock@gmx.net

**МАДЛЕН Блок** – аспирантка Факультета общественных наук Университета Восточной Финляндии (Куопио).

E-mail: madeleineblock@gmx.net

**KHVATOVA, Tatiana Ju.** – *Saint-Petersburg State Polytechnical University.*

195251, Politekhnikeskaya str. 29. St. Petersburg. Russia. E-mail: tatiana-khvatova@mail.ru

**ХВАТОВА Татьяна Юрьевна** – доцент кафедры международного бизнеса Инженерно-экономического института Санкт-Петербургского государственного политехнического университета, кандидат технических наук.

195251, Россия, Санкт-Петербург, ул. Политехническая, д. 29. E-mail: tatiana-khvatova@mail.ru

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