


**INFLUENCE OF DIVERSE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF SME EMPLOYEES
WITH REGARD TO INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING**

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**INFLUENCE OF DIVERSE CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF SME EMPLOYEES
WITH REGARD TO INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING**

by

TINASHE EMMANUEL NYATSAMBO

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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at the CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Supervisor: Prof P.A. van Brakel

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T. Nyatsambo

Signed

01-10-2012

Date

Abstract

Knowledge management has become a critical success factor in business organisations today. Significant research has been conducted globally and various authors and researchers seem to agree that knowledge management is a tool, which organisations can use to gain competitive advantage. However, to be able to effectively use knowledge management as a tool, organisations should overcome certain hurdles.

One of the key areas within knowledge management is knowledge sharing and for this to happen smoothly, companies should appreciate the value of their information and knowledge resources. Promoting effective sharing and transfer of intellectual assets is the core of knowledge management. Knowledge sharing is, therefore, vital for the success of a knowledge management system. One of the primary barriers to this success exists when there is no continuous flow of information and knowledge within an organisation.

With the world economy becoming increasingly global, organisations have become more diversified than ever. When employees from various backgrounds come together in a company, knowledge sharing should take place in spite of cultural differences. In this research study diversification is concerned with social and cultural backgrounds. National culture and social backgrounds have been identified by researchers as factors that impact knowledge sharing. Diversified companies normally have a number of languages spoken amongst employees, since employees come from different ethnic groups, which all add to the task at hand with regard to successful knowledge management.

Culture influences the way that people think, behave and the way in which they manage knowledge. Culture defines who people are, which certainly has an effect on knowledge management, hence the need to have a better understanding of culture and knowledge management. This research therefore, focuses mainly on information and knowledge sharing in socially and culturally diverse SMEs. There is a need to conduct more research in this area, since South Africa is a culturally diversified country.

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CHAPTER ONE: Background to the research

1.1 Introduction

Knowledge management has become a critical success factor in business organisations today. Significant research has been conducted globally and various authors and researchers (Tong and Mitra, 2009; Goh and Hooper, 2009; Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2008) seem to agree that knowledge management is a tool, which organisations can use to gain competitive advantage. Choo (1998:12) states that one of the primary objectives of knowledge management is to identify and leverage collective knowledge in an organisation to achieve the overriding goal of helping organisations to compete and survive. However, to be able to effectively use knowledge management as a tool, organisations should overcome some hurdles, which are discussed below.

Promoting the effective sharing and transfer of intellectual assets is the core of knowledge management (Call, 2005:19). Knowledge sharing is, therefore, vital to the success of a knowledge management system. One of the primary barriers to this success exists when there is no continuous flow of information and knowledge within an organisation. Knowledge sharing involves the sharing of organisationally relevant information, ideas, suggestions, and expertise among employees of an organisation (Bartol and Srivistave, 2002:64-65).

The notion of knowledge sharing has attracted much attention from both researchers and practitioners alike in the field of knowledge management. Many studies have been conducted to identify factors that impede knowledge sharing (Chua, 2005:117-118). With the world economy becoming increasingly global, organisations have become more diversified than ever. In this research study diversification is concerned with social and cultural backgrounds. National culture and social backgrounds have been identified by researchers as one of the factors that impact knowledge sharing (Ardichvili, Maurer, Li, Wentling, and Stuedemann, 2006:94; Finestone and Snyman, 2006:128; King, Kruger and Pretorius, 2007:285; Tong and Mitra, 2009:52).

This research focuses mainly on information and knowledge sharing in social and cultural diverse SMEs. There is a need to conduct more research in this area since

South Africa is a highly culturally diversified country. Few studies have explicitly focussed on a discussion of cultural factors, which influence knowledge management and transfer (Ardichvili et al., 2006:94; Chow, Deng and Ho, 2000:65; Ford and Chan, 2003:11; Holden, 2001:155; and Hutching and Michailova, 2004:21). Not much research has been conducted in South Africa with regard to information and knowledge sharing in multicultural organisations. Most research done on cultural diversity has focused mainly on larger organisations (King et al., 2007; Finestone and Snyman, 2006). Thus, there is a need to conduct more research since South Africa is a highly diversified country culturally.

1.2 Statement of research problem

As mentioned in the background to the research problem, knowledge sharing is a critical success factor for knowledge management. This should involve the continuous flow of information and knowledge between employees within an organisation. Since knowledge is built on past experiences (Chow, 2000:66-67), social and cultural backgrounds have an impact on knowledge sharing. Our past social and cultural experiences should affect the way we behave in our work environments. As a result, “the diversity in social and cultural backgrounds of employees in South African SMEs might have a negative influence on the quality of information and knowledge sharing”.

1.3 Research questions, sub-questions and objectives

Table 1.1 give an outline of the research problem, research question, research sub-question and objectives for this research.

Table 1.1: Research problem, questions and sub-questions

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Research problem | Diversity in social and cultural backgrounds of employees in South African SMEs have a negative influence on the quality of information and knowledge sharing | |
| Research question | How do differences in social and cultural backgrounds affect the way in which employees share information and knowledge with each other within an organisation (SME)? | |
| Research sub-questions | Research method(s) | Objectives |
| What aspects of social and cultural backgrounds affect and limit effective information and knowledge sharing? | Literature analysis | To identify areas of a social and cultural nature that affect information and knowledge sharing. This should address the current status of global trends in terms of information and knowledge |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | | sharing in multicultural organisations. |
| Do employees feel that they are obliged to share information and knowledge with other employees? | Literature analysis | To identify if employees come from social and cultural backgrounds that encourage them to share information and knowledge. This should address issues on whether employees feel free to ask, give or obtain information from other employees when executing their daily duties. |
| To what extent do employees in South African SMEs share information and knowledge with other employees <i>regardless</i> of their social and cultural differences? | Qualitative research (structured interviews) | To determine the current trend of information and knowledge sharing in South African SMEs in multicultural organisations. This should determine to what extent employees interact and communicate with each other. |

1.4 Current status of the research area

Knowledge management has become one of the major focus areas in the corporate world. The fact that knowledge management draws attention from worldwide organisations shows how the discipline has emerged as a major concern. With knowledge sharing being a key issue, organisations now strive to have a system that will allow for the easy flow of information and knowledge in all areas of the organisation. Knowledge sharing extends through the entire organisation, which implies its significance in the organisation.

Yeh, Lai, and Ho (2006:794) mention that knowledge management has a significant influence on the success or failure of business management which causes effective knowledge management within an enterprise and this has become one of the hottest topics for discussions in the literature. Yeh et al. (2006:794) further state that knowledge management is a key element in an organisation's ability to realise the full potential of its intellectual assets in strategic and tactical decision making and in creating a competitive advantage.

Culture is one of the factors that affect knowledge sharing. Not much research has been conducted on diverse cultures and how they impact knowledge sharing in South Africa. However, most authors agree that dissimilarities in the way that people, especially from different social and cultural backgrounds, interpret or accept knowledge sharing differ (King et al., 2007:285). This makes this research worthwhile especially when dealing with a South African situation where there is a vast diversity of cultures within the country.

1.4.1 Defining knowledge

To fully understand the concept of knowledge management it is important to have a firm understanding of the basic underlying principles. One of the principles is to understand what knowledge is, and how it is applied in the organisation context.

Various definitions of knowledge have been proposed by various authors. A comprehensive definition of knowledge is one by Davenport and Prusak (1998:19) who states that knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experiences, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provide a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of the knower. In organisations it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories, but also in organisational routines, processes, practices and norms. Various definitions from different authors and researchers note how knowledge is linked to experiences (which are ever-increasing and ever-changing), routines, practices, beliefs, values, and interactions between people and technologies, intuitions, insights, behaviours, perceptions and norms (Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2008:142; Duffy, 2000:64-65; Finestone and Snyman, 2006:130). Hence knowledge, according to these definitions, is highly affected by the social and cultural backgrounds of a person, which can determine the outcome of any information and knowledge sharing initiatives within organisations.

1.4.2 Knowledge management

Significant research has been conducted on knowledge management yet there is no universally agreed definition. Many scholars have proposed multiple definitions, but none of them are really completely accurate or inaccurate (Call, 2005:20). Therefore, it will be essential to come up with a suitable definition for knowledge management. In this research defining knowledge management is the starting point. Prusak (1997:220) defines knowledge management as a systematic process of finding, selecting, organising, distilling and presenting information in a way that improves an employee's comprehension in a specific area of interest. Specific knowledge management activities help the organisation to focus on acquiring, storing and

utilising knowledge for aspects such as problem solving, dynamic learning, strategic planning and decision making.

Knowledge management is highly linked to people, and how information should flow through the whole organisation. Failure to create an environment to achieve such objectives may result in a failed knowledge management system. Since knowledge management takes place on three levels, namely individual, group, and organisational (Finestone and Snyman, 2006:130), it is crucial that people become the central figure since they are directly involved at all three levels.

Metaxiotis, Ergazakis and Psarra (2005:11) mention that one of the problems that knowledge management faces presently is that there is too much focus on technologies instead of people. They further state that a majority of knowledge management frameworks do not equally address the technical (technology, organisational structures), as well as the non-technical (cultural and human resources) aspects. This does not mean to undermine the importance of technologies in knowledge management, but there should be a balance between the two. Knowledge management should ensure that people and technology combine to make sure that information gets to the right people in the right form at the right time (Call, 2005:23). Knowledge should connect information and people, and people with people (Call, 2005:21). For this to happen there is a need for communication and interaction amongst employees. Smooth information and knowledge flow will inevitably lead to the success of a knowledge management programme.

Knowledge management is rooted in human experience (Oltra, 2005:80; Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2009:144) and social context (Alavi, Kayworth and Leidner, 2005:193). Therefore, managing it requires not only attention to the IT, but even more to the people in that organisation.

1.4.2.1 Managing cultural diverse organisations

Traditionally, organisational culture encompasses shared values, beliefs, behaviour, and background of the organisation's members (White, 1999:471). Culture once portrayed ethnic or nationality groups, but in recent years cultural factors include race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability (White, 1999:471). For purposes of this research, social and cultural backgrounds will, *inter alia*, include race, age, ethnicity, nationality, language, educational background, friends, family, religion,

norms and values. These are some of the elements that have an impact on a person's identity and, which affect how a person relates and interacts with other people in an organisational setting, thereby affecting their information and knowledge sharing skills. The different ways in which people were raised and where they were raised should have a huge impact on information and knowledge sharing.

People of different ethnic backgrounds possess different attitudes, values and norms. This alters or varies their attitudes and performance at work (White, 1999:471). People act, interact, and communicate with other people based on their social and cultural backgrounds, which may be consciously or sub-consciously. In an organisational setting, more often than not, differences in cultural norms and values among ethnic groups reveal themselves in different work related-behaviours (White, 1999:471). One area is individualism and collectivism.

Ardichvili et al. (2006:96) note that individualism describes the tendency of people to place their goals ahead of a larger social group such as the organisation. Members of individualism see themselves as independent of others. Conversely, Hofstede (2001) mentions that collectivism tends to give priority to the goals of the larger collective group that they belong to, which serves the community. These two seem to form a basis for differentiating between social and cultural backgrounds. Most of the research that has been conducted worldwide on multiculturalism (Ardichvili, et al., 2006; King et al., 2007; Finestone and Snyman, 2006) based their research on individualism and collectivism as the differentiating factor.

According to White (1999:477), some cultures view relationships in terms of groups and want teamwork to be the norm. On the contrary, those from cultures that emphasize the individual, feel most comfortable with voluntary and informal teams. The effects of cultural diversity on organisational behaviour are complex and powerful. The impact of diversity on knowledge sharing may as well have a positive impact.

1.4.3 Knowledge sharing

Bartol and Srivastava (2002:68) state that knowledge sharing involves the sharing of organisationally relevant information, ideas, suggestions and expertise among employees of the organisation. This can happen formally or informally. The notion of knowledge sharing has attracted much attention from both researchers and

practitioners in the field of knowledge management (Chua, 2005:117). Many studies have been conducted to identify factors that impede knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing should be critical in an organisation since it involves the flow of information and knowledge. What this basically implies is that knowledge sharing has a lot to do with people-to-people interactions, which is highly affected by their social and cultural backgrounds. Apart from their backgrounds, employees must trust that sharing enhances employment status and does not undermine the business's need for them (Call, 2005:25). In spite of the benefits of knowledge management, Goh and Hooper (2009:22) identify a lack of knowledge sharing as one of the barriers to a knowledge management system.

In order for an organisation to utilise knowledge assets, knowledge must move smoothly through the organisation (Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2008:150). However, sometimes employees tend not to have an urgency to share information and knowledge and they prefer to retain it. Goh and Hooper (2009:22) attribute this lack of sharing to the perception that knowledge is power, while Ladd and Ward (2002) saw too strong a focus on competition within the organisation. These are some of the reasons why employees do not share information and knowledge. Most of these barriers to knowledge sharing can be linked to different social and cultural backgrounds. For example, an employee might value competitiveness and as a result they prefer not to share information and knowledge. This is a trait of individualistic culture.

More factors affecting sharing and transfer of knowledge in an organisation concern the motivation for sharing (Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2008:143), the ability of the source to share and the ability of the recipient to accept the knowledge. In order to have a functional knowledge management system, there is a need for knowledge transfer across organisational borders (Holden, 2002:160), which can only be addressed by tackling the above factors, which limit employees from sharing their information and knowledge.

1.4.3.1 Knowledge sharing and multiculturalism in other countries

The term *culture* may refer to two dimensions in the context of knowledge management: organisational and national culture (Ford and Chan, 2003:11-12). Several prior studies (Ardichvili et al., 2006; Chow et al., 2000; Ford and Chan, 2003; Holden, 2001) have made important contributions to national cultural influences on

peoples' behaviours in knowledge sharing within multi-cultural organisations. Not much research has been conducted in Africa to address this issue of knowledge sharing and multiculturalism. A number of factors such as hierarchy consciousness, fear of losing face, a sense of modesty, competitiveness, and preference for face-to-face communication can act as barriers to knowledge management initiatives within Chinese organisations (Tong and Mitra, 2009:49).

King et al. (2007:286) identify culture as the frequently recognised “make-or-break factor” in successful knowledge management systems. Companies have people who speak different languages, not to mention ethnic groups, tribes and races. Thus, effective management of cultural diversity in knowledge management systems is essential. According to research done by King et al. (2007:285), Western cultures do not encourage a social exemplar of knowledge sharing, but strive for self determination, independence, and attainment of personal interest while Asian cultures nurture sharing and teamwork. Little is mentioned about Africa (King et al., 2007:285). This necessitates for more research within Africa in order to establish how various African cultures influence knowledge sharing.

Ardichvili et al. (2006:96) point out that research on organisational learning and knowledge creation indicates that knowledge sharing, communication, while learning in organisations are profoundly influenced by the cultural values of individual employees.

1.4.3.2 Knowledge sharing and multiculturalism in South Africa

King et al. (2007) and Finestone and Snyman (2006) are two of the few researchers who have conducted research on multiculturalism in South African organisations and they identify a number of factors that affect knowledge sharing in South Africa. With so much diversity amongst South African cultures, it might become a major issue to integrate them in the organisation and be able to still carry out knowledge and information sharing effectively.

One issue in South Africa is language. People are reluctant to share if they cannot understand concepts or find it difficult to get their message across (King et al., 2007:287). It is not the easiest of tasks considering that there are 11 official languages in the country, not to mention people from other nationalities who immigrated to this country. Language difficulties can easily result in

misunderstandings and frustrations. Even perceptions of intelligence can be influenced by a person's command of the business language (Finestone and Snyman, 2006:131). Language proficiency is a major issue when dealing with information and knowledge sharing. Smooth communication can easily be hindered by the simple fact that one will not be proficient in a particular language.

Another issue identified by these two researchers (King *et al.*, 2007; Finestone and Snyman, 2006) is that of government social policies which also affect knowledge sharing. One such policy is Affirmative Action, which affects knowledge sharing directly or indirectly (King *et al.*, 2007:287). The policy of Affirmative Action has potential to cause a different kind of social dilemma, namely to empower one group, and sanctioning another, which leads to unwillingness to share information (Finestone & Snyman, 2005:131). This may create division in the organisational setting based on race and ethnicity.

Individualistic and collectivist culture styles are evident in South Africa. White South Africans adhere to a western-style culture, and prefer written communication styles, (namely contracts) as a way of trust. Black African, conversely are more oral and prefer oral communication (King *et al.*, 2007:287).

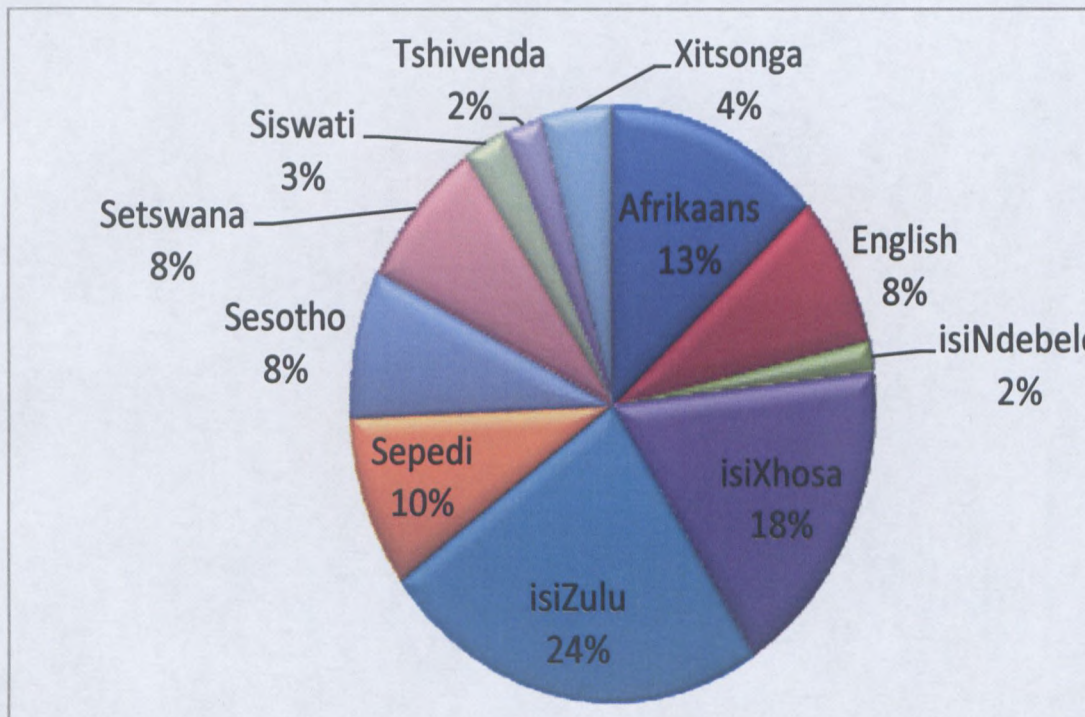
1.4.3.3 South Africa's population

A brief summary of South Africa's population is necessary to have a fluid foundation for this research. The following text outlines South Africa's population and its makeup. This is a significant portion of the research, since there is a need to have an understanding of the different languages and races in the country. South Africa is a nation comprising over 47-million people of diverse origins, cultures, languages and beliefs. According to the mid-2007 estimates from Statistics South Africa, the country's population stands at some 47.9-million, up from the census 2001 count of 44.8-million (South Africa.info, 2009).

South Africa is a multilingual country. Besides the 11 officially recognised languages, scores of others - African, European, Asian and more - are spoken here, as the country lies at the crossroads of southern Africa. The country's Constitution guarantees equal status to all 11 official languages to cater for the country's diverse peoples and their cultures. These are: Afrikaans; English; IsiNdebele; IsiXhosa; IsiZulu; Sepedi; Sesotho; Setswana; SiSwati; Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Nine of the

country's 11 official languages are African, reflecting a variety of ethnic groupings, which nonetheless have a great deal in common in terms of background, culture and descent (South Africa.info).

Figure 1.1: Language distribution in South Africa (Source: South Africa.info)



English is generally understood across the country, as language of business, politics and the media, and is the country's *lingua franca*. But it only ranks fifth from the 11 official as a home language. English has been both a highly influential language in South Africa, and a language influenced, in turn, by adaptation to the country's different communities. Presently, English is the country's *lingua franca*, and the primary language of government, business, and commerce. It is a compulsory subject in all schools, and the medium of instruction in most schools and tertiary institutions.

According to the 2001 census, isiZulu is the mother tongue of 23.8% of South Africa's population; followed by isiXhosa at 17.6%; Afrikaans at 13.3%; Sepedi at 9.4%; and English and Setswana each at 8.2%. Sesotho is the mother tongue of 7.9% of South Africans, while the remaining four official languages are spoken at home by less than 5% of the population each (Figure 1.2).

Table 1.2: Home Languages in South Africa (Source: South Africa.info)

| Home language | Black | Coloured | Indian or Asian | White | Total |
|---------------|--------|----------|-----------------|-------|--------|
| Afrikaans | 0.7% | 79.5% | 1.7% | 59.1% | 13.3% |
| English | 0.5% | 18.9% | 93.8% | 39.3% | 8.2% |
| IsiNdebele | 2.0% | 0.0% | 0.3% | 0.1% | 1.6% |
| IsiXhosa | 22.3% | 0.3% | 0.1% | 0.1% | 17.6% |
| IsiZulu | 30.1% | 0.3% | 0.2% | 0.1% | 23.8% |
| Sepedi | 11.9% | 0.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.4% |
| Sesotho | 10.0% | 0.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 7.9% |
| Setswana | 10.3% | 0.4% | 0.0% | 0.1% | 8.2% |
| SiSwati | 3.4% | 0.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 2.7% |
| Tshivenda | 2.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 2.3% |
| Xitsonga | 5.6% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 4.4% |
| Other | 0.3% | 0.2% | 3.8% | 1.1% | 0.5% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| | 35.42m | 3.99m | 1.16m | 4.29m | 44.82m |

With such diversity amongst the South African population, it is important to evaluate how this diversity in culture and social background has an impact on knowledge sharing in the business environment. Aspects such as language affect communication patterns, which, in turn affect knowledge sharing. Studying different behaviours in different cultures, therefore, has some contribution to the knowledge management field.

1.4.4 Small and medium enterprises (SMEs)

To gain a full understanding of knowledge management in SMEs, it is important to have a clear picture of SMEs and what they represent. There are many different criteria that can be used to define SMEs. Some authors use the number of employees, which can be 250 people, while others use revenue figures (Desouza & Awazu, 2006:33). According to various researches, SMEs seem to contribute significantly to a country's economy and, therefore, research in SMEs is vital. In

various European countries SMEs constitute at least 90% of the industry (Desouza & Awazu, 2005:32; Wong, 2005:266; Bozbura, 2007:211; Wong & Aspinwall, 2005:65). Since SMEs are significant to a country's industry, this research seeks to study how SMEs are impacted by the advent of knowledge management, particularly knowledge sharing and multiculturalism. To have a clear understanding it was necessary to first consider knowledge management and SMEs in other countries.

1.4.4.1 Knowledge management and SMEs in other countries

Initially, knowledge management appeared to be adopted only in large, multinational and international companies, hence research has not considered the differences of company size, as well as the specific features of SMEs that could affect knowledge management (Wong, 2006:262; Wong & Aspinwall, 2005:65). As a result, most of the current research in the field is mostly suited for larger companies and might not apply to smaller businesses. Nunes, Annansingh, Eaglestone and Wakefield, (2006:103) further highlight how research in the field has disregarded SMEs in spite of the fact that SMEs require knowledge to tap the competitive edge that they need in industry. Managing what we know is one of the aims of knowledge management. SMEs, therefore, have knowledge, which should be managed to gain that competitive edge.

Larger organisations have different characteristics from SMEs so research is important for SMEs to unveil what should be done to improve knowledge management in SMEs. For example, SMEs may have limited capital, labour, and expertise (Desouza & Awazu, 2006:33); hence they have to do more with fewer resources compared to their larger competitors. Some of the characteristics of SMEs, as proposed by Nunes *et al.* (2006:107) show that SMEs rely heavily on individuals or key persons, which creates vulnerability when such personnel leave. This leaves a gap that may take time to fill, hence the importance of knowledge management in SMEs. In some instances SMEs are still reluctant to take up knowledge management as they still see it as an unnecessary business function (Nunes, *et al.*, 2006:111).

1.4.4.2 SMEs and knowledge management in South Africa

South Africa, as one of the largest economies in Africa, has a significant input from SMEs into the economic growth. With the government promoting and encouraging SMEs, it seems that research in this sector is inevitable for the success of the industry. According to the National Treasury of South Africa (2008), close to 60% of South Africa's workforce is employed by SMEs. According to the Department of Trade and Industry (2008), 98% of South Africa's business population fall within the small business category.

With knowledge management still finding its way in the South African economy, research with regard to SMEs is vital, as they contribute more than 60% of employment's workforce.

In South Africa researchers have focused their attention on knowledge sharing and multiculturalism (Finestone and Snyman, 2006 and King et al., 2007). However no relevant research results could be traced to SMEs, yet they contribute significantly to the industry. This is why this research is relevant as it uncovers how knowledge management, particularly knowledge sharing and multiculturalism have impacted on SMEs. With South Africa being coined as the rainbow nation it is clear that the country is rich with cultural diversity, which will certainly have an impact on knowledge sharing.

1.5 Research design

This research seeks to have a personal involvement with employees of SMEs and to have a clear understanding of their social and cultural backgrounds. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005:132), there are two main research design methods, namely:

- Qualitative, which aims to acquire an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon by using discussion. It is informative and can be conducted on a smaller but focused sample by using data collection methods such as observations, interviews, focus groups and open-ended questionnaires; and
- Quantitative, which signifies the use of numbers to explain and predict a phenomenon. It is representative and can be conducted on a large sample.

Data can be collected by using standard instruments such as closed-ended questionnaires and experiments.

It is appropriate to use the qualitative approach for this research. Qualitative research allows for exploration of detailed in-depth data, which is aimed at description, comparison and prescription (Partington, 2002:110). The qualitative approach has a purpose to describe a situation, phenomenon or problem. Since qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Hoepfi, 1997:47), it allows for a personal inquiry in the form of interviews and open-ended questionnaires. The research includes semi-structured interviews with key people such as managers or owners of a business. These should be able to give a detailed perspective of their knowledge management function in their SMEs. With a qualitative approach in this instance, a personal relationship can be achieved in order to obtain the required information. By engaging the managers and business owners in interviews, the researcher should have a clear understanding about how they treat the importance of information and knowledge sharing. By using an interpretive approach, the researcher should discover the meaning that events have for the individuals who experience them, and the interpretations of those meanings (Hoepfi, 1997:49).

1.5.2 Unit of analysis

The research focuses on employees at SMEs. The research seeks to obtain as much information from employees who have different social and cultural backgrounds, and how they interact with each other. This should uncover different working behaviours of various employees. It was essential to conduct interviews with the managers or owners of the businesses to obtain a clear understanding of knowledge management in SMEs.

Morse and Richards (2002:28) mention that if the purpose of the research is to learn from participants in a setting or process the way that they experience it, the meaning that they give it, and how they interpret what they experience, one requires methods that allow one to discover and do justice to the perceptions and complexities of their interpretations. Qualitative methods have a common goal of generating new ways of seeing existing data. To fully understand cultural diversity and how it impacts knowledge and information sharing, a qualitative approach would be appropriate as it

allows for a deeper understanding of employees and what they feel about their diversity.

1.5.3 Data collection

Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Bell (1999:153) defines data collection as techniques that allow for a systematical collection of information about the objects of study (people, objects, phenomena), and about the setting in which they occur. By obtaining information gathered from both primary and secondary data this should provide a conclusive study to the research.

1.5.3.1 Primary data collection

Interviews were also used to collect data from respondents. An interview is a data collection technique that involves oral questioning of respondents, either individually or as a group (International Development Research Centre). In this instance, a semi-structured interview was used. This provided a predetermined structure of questions, which were posed to respondents. The use of semi-structured interviews is appropriate when the researcher knows enough about the study topic to frame the required discussion in advance (Morse and Richards, 2002:94). With a pre-planned schedule of questions the interview process should obtain the desired information. The interviews were directed at managers and owners of SMEs. The intention was to obtain a clear perspective of the knowledge management structure in the SME and to find out how they view knowledge management.

1.5.3.2 Secondary data collection

Alreck and Settle (1985:419) define secondary data as data that has been acquired for general use or for some purpose other than the information requirements of the project at hand. Most of the secondary data was obtained from the literature analysis, which was used to create a theoretical base for the research.

1.6 Delineation of the research

The research focuses on SMEs in Cape Town. Ideally, the companies should have less than 250 employees in order to classify them as SMEs, as well as a diverse workforce. The research also aimed to study SMEs which have a knowledge management system in place. The geographical area that was covered by the research study involved the Western Cape.

1.7 Contribution of the research

Knowledge management is one of the main foci in the business world since it is now viewed as a tool that can be used to gain competitive advantage. With a lot of worldwide research being conducted on larger organisations, a study of SMEs should provide a clear picture of how knowledge management is applied in SMEs. The research should allow for a clearer understanding of how different social and cultural behaviours have an impact on knowledge and information sharing in South Africa. With such an understanding, companies should be able to apply different techniques to overcome problems or challenges that may result from cultural diversity.

CHAPTER TWO: Culture and its diverse elements

2.1 Introduction

Culture and its various elements have an influence on the management of an organisation. The research sub-question, as formulated in the previous chapter, seeks to identify what aspects of social and cultural backgrounds affect and limit information and knowledge sharing. Cultural diversities come in various forms and it is the aim of this chapter to define culture, and discuss its diverse elements. Companies now have to deal with a diverse workforce. Maximising the potential of the workforce might mean having to understand how best to manage a culturally diverse workforce. This begins with an understanding of the nature of culture and how it may influence the organisation. People in the organisation come from various cultures and, therefore, it will only be natural for a person's behaviour to be influenced by their culture. Understanding the nature of culture can help to identify effective ways of managing such a culturally diverse workforce. This chapter outlines the following:

- understanding the nature of culture
- identifying the different features of culture
- identifying characteristics of culture and how these may have an influence on the organisation
- identifying what aspects of culture affect information and knowledge flow in an organisation.

2.2 What is culture?

The word *culture* is usually reserved for societies (operationalised as nations or as ethnic or regional groups within or across nations). Basically, the word *culture* can be applied to any human collectivity or categories: an organisation, a profession, an age group, an entire gender, or a family (Hofstede, 2001:10). Defining *culture* is crucial for this research. It is at the starting point for this research since it is centred on culture. Realizing a good definition for culture is not easy simply because there have been many different definitions for culture. There are over 160 definitions of the word

culture alone, as documented by Kroebar, 1985¹ cited by Kanungo (2006:25). The word *culture* is one of those words, which should have a clear and straight forward meaning, but again, often various societal groups and different societies let alone perceive culture in many different ways (Sevic, 2003:53). Therefore, from the wide scope of definitions of culture, proposing an appropriate working definition for this research involved considering various definitions and eventually reaching with a conclusion based on these different definitions. The definition for culture in this instance is applied to business organisations and defines how this culture in different individuals has an impact on the organisation. The following section discusses some of the definitions for culture.

2.2.1 Defining culture

Culture has been defined in many ways. One well-known definition by Kluckhohn, 1951² cited by Hofstede, 2001:9 reads as follows:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in their artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (that is, historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditioning elements of future action.

There are many more definitions of *culture*. To be able to fully comprehend and understand these definitions, it will be essential to break down the definition into smaller and manageable parts. This can then be easily applied to an organisational context. Various characteristics of culture have been identified, which should be able to allow a thorough discussion of what culture is, especially in an organisation.

¹ Kroebar, A. and Kluckhohn, C. 1985. *Culture: A critical review of concepts and definitions*. New York: Random House.

² Kluckhohn, C. 1952. The study of culture. In D. Lerner and H.D. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences*, Stanford: Stanford University.

2.2.2 Characteristics of culture

From the various definitions of culture, different characteristics were identified. Given the fact that the word *culture* can be applied to various fields of study, a taxonomy of culture, which is relevant to this research had to be identified. The following are features of culture derived from the various definitions of culture, which are relevant to this research:

- Culture is found in a group setting
- Culture is shared
- Culture has an influence on behaviour, attitudes and values
- Culture is learned, historical and built over time
- Culture involves solving problems, questions and dilemmas
- Culture has an influence on communication
- Culture is a result of inter-personal interactions.

2.2.2.1 Culture is found in a group setting

One of the most common features of the various definitions of culture is that most of them mention how culture is a group phenomenon (Baskaran and Sakumaran, 2007:54; Day 2007:215; Seymen, 2006:299; Hofstede, 1980:25). Culture is found in a group setting, societal setting or a collective setting. A group has a special way of interacting, which differs in different groups. This would mean that one group would have its different characteristics and behaviours that distinguish it from other groups. These cultural groups come in various forms. Common examples would be different races (for example, Blacks, Caucasians, Hispanics); different ethnic groups (for example, Zulu, Xhosa, Shona, Ndebele); religious groups (Christians, Muslims, Jews, Atheists, Scientologists); organisations, sexual affiliation, and gender. These are some of the groups that can be found. By taking a closer look at each of these groups, one can distinctly identify certain features that are homogenous to each group. These different features are what separates the different groups, hence failure to sometimes understand each other when we are placed in a different group from our own.

Laroche (2003:2) argues that culture is a group phenomenon. He mentions that culture is associated with a specific society or people. What makes sense in one

group may not necessarily make sense in another group. Hence, as far as culture is concerned, it distinguishes a society or group of people from one another. Culture is a collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes one group from another (Hofstede, 1980:25). Reyneke (2006:38) mentions that culture is something that we have in common with some people, but not with others.

The question now is 'how does this have an influence on the organisation setting'? In an organisation people come from various groups that were mentioned above. Appreciating this can be one big step towards effective management of the organisation. Because of our different groups, we do not necessarily think the same or respond the same to different situations. This is one aspect of culture. Culture has a lot to do with people in a group who have a common way of thinking and interacting.

2.2.2.2 Culture is shared

Culture is a shared way of life (Kanungo, 2006:26). Culture is shared in the sense that a group or society may have common or shared beliefs, values, and norms. These would probably be different in another group, which will also have its own shared experiences. Scottish people, for example, share a common feeling stemming from years of oppression by the English (Thomas and Inkson, 2004:24). These are the little things that one can find in a particular group of people, which automatically has an effect on how a group interacts with other outside groups.

Culture is a mixture including knowledge, beliefs, art, morality and conventions, which are shared by nearly all the members of a society and, which separates one group from another; other skills and habits; also common attitudes and responsibilities that are subsequently learned such as original lifestyles, emotions and backgrounds (Seymen, 2006:26). These are some of the shared experiences that can be found in different cultures. Bhaskaran and Sakumaran (2007:52) call this 'shared important experiences'.

2.2.2.3 Culture has an influence on behaviour, attitudes and values

Bhaskaran and Sakumaran (2007:54) define culture as dominant and continuing values, attitudes and behaviours of a group that have shared important experiences. Therefore, what separates people from different cultures in this case is their values,

attitudes and behaviours. This would imply that with such differences people, therefore, respond differently in work-related situations based on their cultures. This might be sub-consciously or consciously. Having a group of employees who come from various cultures, (namely different attitudes, values and behaviours) should, therefore, call for an approach to manage such a group to the best interest of the organisation.

Because of the mental programming of the mind, our behaviours', attitudes and values are largely influenced by our culture. Laroche (2003:2) suggests that culture specifies a range of attitudes and behaviours, which are considered acceptable in specific situations, and this in turn, leads to enforcement of those through behaviour. One's behaviour may seem weird or awkward to a person from an outside group, which can create problems in the workplace or can result in differences. Culture can be learned and because of this the human mind can adapt, which allows us to fit in different environments. Thomas and Inkson (2004:25) mention that through a process of acculturation, people can learn about a new culture while still retaining their individual culture. This can be highly important in a work-setting when trying to develop a common culture in the organisation.

2.2.2.4 Culture is learned, historical and built over time

Culture is built over time. It does not merely appear but it is a result of previous generations and years of practice. According to Bhaskaran and Sakumaran (2007:55), an entity's culture is the predominant values and behaviours of its members and such values and behaviours are acquired through a common history or experience. A person's culture does not merely exist. It is a result of past historical experiences. It is embedded in them, so when a person does something over and over again, it becomes part of their culture, which will be how someone identifies themselves. It becomes like a programme wired into someone's brain, and this determines how they react to different situations in life. Some aspects of culture are built into institutions such as religious beliefs, systems of landownership, forms of marriage, and the like (Thomas and Inkson, 2004:24).

From an individual perspective, it all begins when we are born when we are taught about culture from the people close to us, (namely family). We are taught how to speak, and how to play with other children. We are taught, for example, to respond to criticism. These are all aspects of culture that are learnt from an early stage. These

traits of culture will have been passed down from generation to generation, hence their historical value. Laroche (2003:2) mentions that culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through a variety of means such as arts, stories, tales, novels, movies and education. We learn our culture through all these various little aspects and these aspects are what become evident in the workplace. A good example can be that our educational background can have a huge effect on our business etiquette, communication skills, presentation, confidence or self-esteem. Reyneke (2006:39) states that "children learn from formal teachings and by observing how their parents and other adults behave".

2.2.2.5 Culture involves solving problems, questions and dilemmas

Day (2007:215) mentions that culture is the way in which a group of people solve problems. He further states that different groups of people tend to respond to various problems, questions and dilemmas inherent in international business in ways that make sense to them. This is an interesting viewpoint considering that in the workplace environment, there are always various problems, questions and dilemmas. Employees in the workplace are faced with different situations everyday. According to the definition, culture is how people will solve such problems or respond to such situations. Because people come from a diversity of cultures, they will solve or look at these situations in different ways, based on their cultures, beliefs, attitudes or based on what makes sense to them.

According to Day's definition of culture, as discussed in the previous paragraph, people from different cultures should be managed differently. The reason is that the organisation will strive for a common goal and employees must be at the same level when dealing with various problems that they face at work. This should not disqualify people's individualities based on their cultures, but should promote the organisation as a unit and as its organisational culture. To support Day's definition of culture in respect of how people solve problems, Trompenaars (1997:12) also mentions the same aspect. He suggests that culture is a way in which people solve problems and different cultures, therefore, have different ways of solving common problems.

2.2.2.6 Culture has an influence on communication

One important aspect of culture that has been identified is that of communication. Kanungo (2006:26) observes that communication and culture are acquired

simultaneously and neither exists without the other. Culture is a shared way of life and consensus is made on it only by communication. If communication is part of culture, then language should have a big influence on managing cultural diversity in organisations.

Language proficiency in the business language becomes an essential tool. A good command of English, for instance, can help someone in corporate South Africa to fair well. Due to various cultural differences, English is not a first language to many, hence a good command of English should be acquired with time (that is culture is learned). Poor English skills can result in 'poor communication' skills, which can have a negative impact on information and knowledge sharing. Kanungo (2006:25) adds another view on culture. He mentions that culture is based on languages, economy, religion, policies, social institutions, class, values, status, attitudes, manners, customs, material items, aesthetics and education, which consequentially influence managerial values.

Seymen (2006:300), like Kanungo also touches on aspects, which relate to culture and communication. He states that culture is a way of life and a form of communication for resolution for people. He further states that: '*Culture is communication and communication is culture*'.

2.2.2.7 Culture is a result of inter-personal interactions

Sevic (2003:56) also adds another dimension to defining culture. He states that culture is a product of inter-personal interactions within society. There is a wide range of things about people that can influence each other, and while beliefs, attitudes and behaviours cover a whole range, there are even more issues over, which interpersonal influence extends such as language, technical standards and special norms. Sevic (2003:56) asserts that culture is affected by the fact that people interact and communicate with each other. In the midst of all these interpersonal interactions, one can identify cultural traits that are evident in peoples' behaviours and interactions.

2.3 Cultural dimensions

Thomas and Inkson (2004:13) mention the idea that although a general approach to culture is not feasible, it is, however, possible to “unpackage” or “map” culture by describing their essential features in order to understand it. In order to fulfil this, theories and frameworks have been postulated by different researchers and these theories seek to describe cultural traits. These theories are widely referred to as *cultural dimensions*. Most of these cultural dimensions are a result of intense research over long periods of time. They also take into account the different possible variables that can affect the validity of these dimensions. Basically, researchers seek to investigate how people in different cultures behave in the business environment. How much of a person's culture affects their work ethic? Studies have shown that owing to our different cultural backgrounds, we tend to act differently based on our cultural backgrounds.

As discussed in the previous section, culture comprises of many different facets and these are programmed in our minds, which allow us to act differently. Cultural dimensions, therefore, act as a yardstick when dealing with issues relating to cultural differences in the workplace. Cultural dimensions act as a measure of different cultures and how they are likely to respond in different work situations.

Because of the various cultural dimensions that exist, it is important for this research to discuss some of these dimensions, which should allow for a clearer understanding of culture. Early and Singh (2000:28) state that there are four recognised attempts to profile the cultures of nations [Trompenaars (1997), Schwartz (1994³), Hofstede (1980), and Maznevski et al., (1993⁴)]. However, it will be essential to consider various other cultural theories.

This research seeks to use an appropriate framework to study the implications of culture in the workplace by considering the above mentioned frameworks together with other known frameworks. The following section presents some of these cultural dimensions, which have been researched by various researchers.

³ Schwartz, S.H. 1994. Beyond individualism/collectivism: New cultural dimensions of values. In U. Kim, H.C. Triandis, C. Kagitcibasi, S.C. Choi, and G. Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method and applications*, Thousand Oaks:Sage.

⁴ Maznevski, M., Nason, S. And DeStefano, J. 1993. Fourteen faces of culture: A new instrument for understanding cultural differences. A paper presented at the academy of International Business, Annual meeting, Maui, Hawaii, October

2.3.1 Trompenaars' seven dimensions of national culture

Trompenaars (1997:28) formulated seven cultural dimensions as shown below:

- **Universalism versus particularism** - always applying the best way or a standard rule vs. deciding on the basis of a specific case, especially when friendship is involved.
- **Individualism versus collectivism** - people regarding themselves primarily as individuals vs. part of a group or community.
- **Neutral versus emotional** - attaching importance to being objective and detached as opposed to permitting emotions to become involved.
- **Specific versus diffuse** - confining business to the contractual versus involving personal contacts as well.
- **Achievement versus ascription** - evaluating people on achievement versus evaluating them according to background and connections.
- **Attitudes towards time** - future versus past orientation and how past, present, and future are seen to be related.
- **Attitudes towards the environment** - the view that individuals can shape the environment and other people (inner-direction) versus one that we have to live in harmony with the environment and with other people, and hence take our cues from them (outer-direction).

According to Kanungo (2006:25), Trompenaars based his analysis on different cultural factors such as relations between employees, attitudes towards authority, ways of thinking and learning, attitudes towards people, ways of changing, ways of motivating and rewarding; and criticism and conflict resolution.

However, like many other cultural frameworks, Trompenaars' framework has received some criticism from some renowned researchers. Hofstede (2001:18) concludes from a re-analysis of Trompenaars' data that only two dimensions can be confirmed statistically, individualism/achievement and universalism/diffuse. Mead (2000:28) also criticises Trompenaars' work on the basis that it meets practical rather

than academic needs. He argues that the pool of research is vaguely defined and lacks homogeneity; hence only imprecise comparisons can be made between cultures.

2.3.2 Schwartz's cultural dimensions

The Schwartz framework was a result of over 44 000 respondents since the 1980s. The results from Schwartz's study resulted in 10 dimensions at an individual level, as shown in Table 2.1 and seven dimensions at a cultural level, (Fontaine and Richardson, 2005:66).

Table 2.1: Schwartz's ten dimensions at an individual-level (Source: Fontaine and Richardson, 2005:66)

| Value | Definition |
|----------------|--|
| Power | Social status, dominance over people and resources |
| Achievement | Personal success according to social standards |
| Hedonism | Pleasure or sensuous gratification |
| Stimulating | Excitement and novelty |
| Self-direction | Independence of thought and action |
| Universalism | Understanding, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and nature |
| Benevolence | Preserving and enhancing the welfare of people to whom one is close |
| Tradition | Respect and commitment to cultural or religious customs and ideas |
| Conformity | Restraints of action and impulses that harm others and violate social expectations |
| Security | Safety and stability of society, relationships and self |

Table 2.2: Schwartz's seven dimensions at a cultural level (Source: Thomas and Inkson, 2004:35-36)

| Cultural level | Description |
|-----------------------|---|
| Embeddedness | People as part of a collective |
| Hierarchy | Unequal description of power |
| Mastery | Exploitation of the natural or social environment |
| Affective autonomy | Pursuit of positive experiences |
| Intellectual autonomy | Independent pursuit of own ideas |
| Egalitarianism | Recognition of people as moral equals |
| Harmony | Fitting in harmoniously with the environment |

Fontaine and Richardson (2005:65) mention how the work of Schwartz has been internationally recognised by Church and Lonner, (1998); Early and Singh, (2000); and Hofstede, (2001), among others. However, research by Schwartz was largely conducted in Malaysia and hence the results were not completely global in nature.

2.3.3 The GLOBE study

The GLOBE cultural dimension is one of the most recent studies on organisational values and culture (Chhokar, Brodbeck and House, 2007). It synthesised cultural findings from 61 countries on nine cultural dimensions (Rao, 2009:167). These dimensions are presented in detail in Table 2.3. The GLOBE study was based largely on other cultural studies, particularly Hofstede (1980) and Kluckholm and Strodtbeck (1961⁵). The GLOBE study conducted in the period of 1994 to 1997 was a collaborative effort of about 170 researchers from 61 countries who researched about 951 non-multinational organisations. The GLOBE respondents were managerial employees and this extensive research project was theory driven, and based on extensive literature (Hofstede, 2006:885).

Table 2.3: The GLOBE study (Source: Chhokar et al., 2007:15)

| | <i>Cultural dimension</i> | <i>Definition (the degree to which)</i> |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Assertiveness | Individuals in organisations or societies are assertive in social relationships |
| 2 | Future-orientation | The degree to which individuals in organisations or societies have long term views and goals |
| 3 | Gender egalitarianism | Organisations or society promotes gender equality |
| 4 | Humane orientation | Individuals in organisations or societies reward individuals for positive behaviour |
| 5 | Institutional collectivism | The degree to which people feel part of a group versus preferring individual freedoms |
| 6 | In-group collectivism | The degree to which people are loyal to family, employers, organisations |
| 7 | Performance orientation | Upper management in organisations and leaders in societies reward group members for performance excellence |
| 8 | Power distance | The degree to which people are and accept being separated |
| 9 | Uncertainty-avoidance | Organisations and societies avoid uncertainty by relying on practices and procedures |

2.3.4 Hofstede's cultural dimensions of national culture

When it comes to issues of culture and how it relates to the workplace, one of the most influential researchers' is Hofstede (Reyenke, 2006:38). Some of the cultural dimensions mentioned above had some reference to Hofstede's work such as the GLOBE study. Hofstede's work has been acknowledged and used by various authors

⁵ Kluckhohn, C. 1952. The study of culture. In D. Lerner and H.D. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

and researchers, which makes it a highly lucrative model to use. It should be noted that while Hofstede's work has been criticized by some, he is still considered by many to be the father of the idea that national culture affects management (Joynt and Warner, 1996:39).

Hofstede's work was carried out when he was employed as manager of the Personnel Research Department of IBM Europe. Hofstede's work since 2001 has scores listed for 74 countries and regions, partly based on replications and extensions of the IBM study on different international populations (Hofstede, 2001:1). Subsequent studies, which validate the earlier results have included commercial airline pilots and students in 23 countries, civil service managers in 14 countries, 'up-market' consumers in 15 countries and 'elites' in 19 countries (Hofstede 2001:1).

From his initial study, Hofstede proposed four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity (Hofstede, 1997). The fifth dimension, long-versus short-term orientation, was found in answers of student samples from 23 countries around 1985 (Hofstede, 1997:3). The five cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede are summarized below:

- Power Distance Index (PDI) - the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), which is defined from below, and not from above. Power and inequality, of course, are extremely fundamental facts of any society and anybody with some international experience will be aware that 'all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others (Hofstede, 2001:1).
- Individualism (IDV) - on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents), that continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 2001:1).

- Masculinity (MAS) - versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between genders, which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found. The IBM studies revealed that (a) women's values differ less among societies than men's values; (b) men's values from one country to another contain a dimension from assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other (Hofstede, 2001:2).
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) - deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for Truth. It indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual (Hofstede, 2001:2).
- Long-Term Orientation (LTO) - versus short-term orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars, which dealt with Virtue regardless of Truth. Values associated with Long Term Orientation are thrift and perseverance; values associated with Short Term Orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'. Both the positively and the negatively rated values of this dimension are found in the teachings of Confucius, the most influential Chinese philosopher who lived around 500 B.C.; however, the dimension also applies to countries without a Confucian heritage (Hofstede, 2001:2).

One of the major criticisms of Hofstede's work was expressed by Mead (1998:41; Holt and Wigginton, 2002:38) who mention that his initial study, though global in scope, was limited to IBM, and that IBM employees are not necessarily representative of societies at large. Another criticism was by Fang (2003:357) who criticised Hofstede's fifth dimension as being based solely on Confucian values, but points out that Confucian values are not the only values that have an influence on Chinese culture. In addition the study was conducted amongst students who are not

representative of the broader population. It is, important to take note of all these criticisms of Hofstede's work. It is however, Hofstede's work, as mentioned earlier, that is still regarded as the authority on cultural dimensions, and is referred to most often in academics' literature (Holt and Wigginton, 2002). Hofstede's findings have subsequently been proven on various occasions outside the IBM context (Barkema and Vermeulen, 1997:845; Holt and Wigginton, 2002).

In the following chapter there is a need to use one or more of the cultural dimensions which were discussed in the previous paragraphs. The reason is that these cultural dimensions profile culture and show its effects on organisations. Different points such as individualism, power distance, and masculinity should be applied to present a picture of how peoples' various cultures have an influence on the organisation. However, before moving on to the next chapter, an understanding of cultural diversity is essential. There is a need to know what constitutes a culturally diverse situation and how best organisations can manage such situations.

2.4 Cultural diversity

Richardson (2005:24) refers to cultural diversity as existence in a community or organisation of people from different backgrounds, or race or ethnicity, different genders with different beliefs and values with different expectations and different stages of life. He further states that the differences encompass patterns of lifestyle, values, beliefs, ideals and practices, race, ethnicity, national origin, language and religion. According to Seymen (2006:297), the word diversity in the context of culture can be defined as a mixture of people who have different group identities within the same social system. These differences can be demographic or other, as described in the previous section on culture.

Various cultures merge to do business and companies are now employing people from a wide range of cultures. Large multinational companies have set up offices in different countries, and this has seen the creation of a diversified workforce, which requires a lot of attention and effort to manage. Evidence suggests that as many as three out of four multinational companies now manage networks of twenty or more overseas operations (Freely and Harzing, 2003:37). The burden of managing such geographically, culturally and linguistically diverse networks is not the easiest of tasks. This certainly creates a diverse workforce and to be able to produce the best

out of such a workforce requires good management. Increasing globalisation has meant that societies, nations and companies are becoming more and more cross-cultural and can, therefore, wreck the harmonious functioning of companies (Richardson, 2005:24).

The level of diversity depends on the extent of the company's global network of subsidiaries, customers, suppliers and joint ventures. Microsoft, for example, have strategies to manage around 80 different languages (Freely and Harzing, 2003:39). Evidently, cultural diversities are increasing as the world becomes more globalised. It is now inevitable for companies to not to operate in a vacuum, hence the need to have various subsidiaries world-wide. Seymen (2006:297) mentions how crucial it has become to manage cultural diversity on a global scale. He mentions that improvement and management of people on a global scale inevitably requires dealing with cultural diversity and related problems.

Leveson and Joiner (2009:380) mention that in spite of the fact that multiculturalism is now a permanent feature of the workplace in many countries, there is little research that has investigated cultural diversity issues amongst employees within an organisational context.

2.5 Summary

At the end of it all, culture seems to be a big word. From the above discussion it is evident that culture comprises of various elements. Human beings from an early stage in their life are taught various life principles. In fact, from the time that we are born, we start learning how to relate to different aspects of life, which is largely based on our cultures. From an early age we are taught values of life, language, norms, beliefs, and interactions with society. Basically from the time that we are born, our society largely has a huge effect on what will constitute our culture. Our society can be our family, friends, religion, and these set the kind of culture that will be evident among us. The way we were raised has a huge effect on our culture. Our religion, for instance, can affect our values. One's family background and friendship background can also have a huge impact on our social etiquette.

Laroche (2003:6) argues that "from a practical sense, having culture as a default mode of operation makes everyday life much simpler". Indeed culture includes an

implicit list of standard operating procedures for daily activities and interactions. For example, culture tells us how to greet one another, when it is appropriate to call someone on the phone, and what topics should be avoided in conversations. In the professional world culture tells us how to achieve our professional goals, what our professional goals should be, how to be a good manager, and so on. In general, culture seems to be a difficult concept to capture and understand in business research and most researchers have focused on addressing problems of definition and measurement of this concept (Seymen, 2006:300).

According to Hofstede (2001), almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time and, therefore, people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different levels of culture. The research sub-question sought to identify aspects of social and cultural backgrounds that affect information and knowledge sharing. The following summarises points which were raised by Reyneke (2006:41) in relation to this viewpoint:

- A national culture is according to one's country;
- A national and/or ethnic and/or religious and/or linguistic affiliation level, as most nations are composed of culturally different regions and/or religious and/or language groups;
- A gender level, according to whether a person is born as a girl or boy;
- A generation level, which separates grandparents from parents and parents from children;
- A social class level, which is associated with educational opportunities and with a person's occupation and profession; and
- For those who are employed, an organisational corporate level according to the way that employees have been socialised by their work organisations.

Other features of culture that were identified also include the following:

- A person's culture is hugely affected by whether they come from an individualistic or collectivistic culture; and
- Issues of power, which is power distance, have an effect on a person's behaviour in the workplace. Some cultures have a huge appreciation/respect for people with power in the sense that it affects their behaviour in the workplace.

Various elements of culture have an influence on the organisation. The following chapter identifies these elements of culture and discusses how they might have an influence on information and knowledge sharing within the organisation. Based on their different cultural backgrounds, employees tend to respond differently to information and knowledge sharing. By understanding how peoples' cultural backgrounds have an influence on information and knowledge sharing, can help to map a way forward to manage information and knowledge flow in a culturally diverse organisation.

CHAPTER THREE: Information, knowledge sharing and culture

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter identified different elements of culture and how these have an effect on an organisation. Culture, as seen in the previous chapter has, various characteristics, which makes it important to devote an understanding to the nature of culture and its various diverse elements. This is important because it is these elements of culture that define a good knowledge management system from a bad one, especially in a multicultural environment. With a clearer understanding of culture and its diverse elements in the organisation, it becomes easier to map a knowledge sharing strategy that can incorporate cultural diversity.

The research sub-question addressed in this chapter investigates if employees feel obliged to share information and knowledge with other employees. Knowledge sharing is all about learning, receiving and sharing information and knowledge. However, with peoples' various cultural and social backgrounds it is not as easy as it may sound. This is largely owing to the fact that peoples' cultures play a huge role in influencing their information and knowledge sharing behaviours. In essence, people's culture may have a big influence on determining employees' information and knowledge sharing behaviours. At the end of this chapter this researcher should:

- have an understanding of the influence of culture on information and knowledge sharing
- identify how employees from different cultures determine their information and knowledge sharing attitude
- identify how the different aspects of culture have an influence on information and knowledge sharing
- find out how best information and knowledge sharing can thrive in a culturally diverse environment.

Since the previous chapter sought to understand the nature of culture and its diverse elements, the researcher finds it appropriate to start Chapter 3 by understanding knowledge management and knowledge sharing.

3.2 Understanding knowledge management

Heralded by many as the new secret weapon of organisations, *knowledge management* has become an important commodity in providing organisations with competitive edge (King et al., 2007:285). Many organisations are now incorporating knowledge management in the organisation because of the various benefits that it yields for the organisation. Because of this hype, knowledge management has become a popular tool in the last 10-20 years and a lot of organisations seek to reap the benefits of this *knowledge management*. Companies now seem to appreciate the knowledge value of their employees and they seek to fully utilise these *knowledge resources* for the benefit of this competitive edge mentioned above. Voelpel and Han (2005:51) mentioned that previous studies by Nonaka (1994), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Davenport and Prusak (1998), von Krogh et al., (2000) and Voelpel (2003) have demonstrated that a company's individual and organisational knowledge serves as one of the cornerstones for its sustained competitive advantage. In essence, an organisation seeks to utilise the collective knowledge of individuals in an organisation and by combining this with the company's organisational knowledge can improve its competitive edge.

In order to have a solid understanding of knowledge management, it is important to begin at grassroots level.

3.2.1 What is knowledge?

Ford and Chan (2003:11) state that in order to understand why knowledge management is a tool to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, one should first ask: 'What is knowledge, and what is knowledge management?' Ford and Chan further state what knowledge is in the aspect of individuals in the organisation. They mention that knowledge, as a resource, is contained within the minds of employees, and is possibly the only resource that, when used, can enhance the value of other capital and does not diminish in value.

Knowledge is an elusive concept that has been classified and defined in a variety of ways (Peltokorpi, 2006:139). However, one of the most commonly used definitions of knowledge is by Davenport and Prusak (1998:5). They define knowledge as 'a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight which

provide a framework to evaluate and incorporate new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories, but also in organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms'. This definition gives an overview of what knowledge is and it can probably be used in any context. It is not applied to only fit to a particular field of study (that is, it is not limited for use in business only).

From other various definitions of knowledge, the following are some points that seem to define knowledge in an organisational context:

- Knowledge can be viewed as a '*resource*' (Ling, Sandhu and Jain, 2009:126). Finestone and Snyman (2005:130) elaborate on this point when they say that knowledge is a resource because it gives its carrier (the individual/organisation) the capacity to act. Once an organisation identifies the resource, in the form of individuals' knowledge, the organisation must then be able to use this to create a competitive edge. This resource can also be shared through the organisation by devising effective ways for the transfer, flow and sharing of this knowledge.
- Knowledge is embedded in '*people*' (Peltokorpi, 2006:139). Rivera-Vazquez, Ortiz-Fournier, and Flores, (2009:3) further state that knowledge is only linked to a person while information may exist independently.
- Knowledge is embedded in '*structures and systems*' (Peltokorpi, 2006:139).
- Knowledge is a *process* (Finestone and Snyman, 2005:130) because it depends on *experience* (ever-increasing) and *context* (ever-changing). The definition by Davenport and Prusak mentions how knowledge is a 'fluid mix of framed experience'. Our experience from an early age increases our knowledge and it improves our capacity to act on it. In an organisational setting, an individual can solve certain problems based on past experience, and not education. This experience is acquired over time and it improves our knowledge base. Again it will be essential for the organisation to tap into such a knowledge base to and utilise it to gain a competitive edge. Furthermore, it is also important for the organisation to retain this knowledge. To further support this, Davenport and Prusak (1998:12) describe knowledge as information, which is combined with experience, context, interpretation, and reflection.

- Knowledge is our capacity to act. (Sveiby, 2000:422). As opposed to information, someone who has knowledge knows how to act on a piece of information. An individual may have a piece of information that shows them how to assemble a car, which does not necessarily mean that they can do it, hence knowledge, our capacity to act. Information represents a flow of messages, but knowledge is created and organised from it (Ling et al., 2009:127).

An individual in an organisation can have different types of knowledge namely tacit and explicit knowledge.

3.2.1.1 Explicit knowledge

Explicit knowledge or codified knowledge is what is transmittable through formal and systematic language. This knowledge is less valuable and can be quickly and easily disseminated to a large number of people (Ling et al., 2009:127). Explicit knowledge, including codified theories, procedures, and rules can be stored and transferred across time and space independent of individuals (Peltokorpi, 2006:139). Explicit knowledge can be independent of the individual and is more related to information. It is easier to store and share within the organisation.

3.2.1.2 Tacit knowledge

Tacit knowledge is more personal and subjective, which makes it difficult to be formalised and communicated. It tends to be rooted in action, commitment, and involvement in a specific context (Ling et al., 2009:127). Tacit knowledge is practical knowledge that is related to action and tends to reside in individuals (Polanyi 1966⁶ cited by Peltokorpi, 2006:139). There is, therefore, more to know than can be explicitly communicated through language. This is more evidence to show how much culture influences information and knowledge sharing. Just because an individual may fail to articulate what they know does not mean that they do not have knowledge. For example, linguists claim that the ability to generate grammatical sentences is not enough to successfully communicate messages within one's culture, much less in cross-cultural situations (Gumperz, 1982⁷ cited by Peltokorpi,

⁶ Polanyi, M. 1966. *The tacit dimension*. London: Routledge.

⁷ Gumperz, J. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

2006:139). Tacit knowledge is more difficult to articulate and is derived from individual experience (Ford and Chan, 2003:12).

3.2.3 Knowledge sharing

The emergence of the knowledge-based economy, the vast size of global organisations, and the intensification of competition have come together to require organisations to be as agile and intelligent as they can be, and one important way to meet this requirement is to enable organisational members to share their knowledge efficiently (Li, 2010:555). Since this research is based on information and knowledge sharing, it is critical to have an understanding of the basic principles of knowledge sharing. A definition of knowledge sharing allows the researcher to see how culture influences *knowledge sharing*.

3.2.3.1 What is knowledge sharing?

There are numerous definitions for knowledge sharing. This section reviews some of the definitions of knowledge sharing with the intention of imparting a clear understanding of what knowledge sharing is. Klein (2008:41) defines knowledge sharing as 'the exchange of knowledge between and among individuals, and within and among teams, organizational units and organizations'. This definition only mentions the exchange of knowledge without specifying the kind of knowledge. A more specific definition of knowledge sharing is by Nayir and Uzuncarsili (2008:143) who specify the kind of knowledge that is shared. They state that knowledge sharing involves 'the sharing of organizational relevant information, ideas, suggestions and expertise among employees of the organization'. So ideally what to share during the process of knowledge sharing is something that is of benefit to the organization; something that will give the organization a competitive edge.

Another relevant definition of knowledge sharing is the definition by Rivera-Vazquez *et al.* (2009:1) who mention that knowledge sharing is a process where individuals mutually exchange both tacit and explicit knowledge, and jointly create new knowledge. This process is essential to translate individual knowledge into organizational knowledge. Knowledge sharing should be carried out with the benefit of the organization in mind. In as much as the individual intends to acquire knowledge in the process, the ultimate intention, as mentioned above is to convert individual knowledge into organizational knowledge. Therefore, knowledge sharing is

about giving, receiving and sharing, and for this to happen there should be a conscious decision to share knowledge. Hutchings and Michailova (2006:23) mention that knowledge sharing is a voluntary act. Still on the point of knowledge sharing being a voluntary act, Li (2010:40) defines knowledge sharing as an activity in which participants are involved in the joint process of contributing, negotiating and utilizing knowledge. Knowledge sharing is a joint process in nature because participants need to be engaged in the process if they really want to share knowledge. Participants can decide to disengage from the process of knowledge sharing. Therefore, knowledge sharing is largely dependent on an individual's willingness to share their knowledge. The organization should continuously cultivate that willingness among its employees in order to allow for continuous knowledge sharing.

3.2.3.2 Why knowledge sharing?

Is knowledge sharing really important? Is it really necessary to experience various difficulties to create smooth information and knowledge sharing? These are a couple of the questions that require answers as far as knowledge sharing is concerned. The following are some of the reasons of the importance of knowledge sharing.

- **Learning** – Since knowledge sharing is about disseminating knowledge from one individual or group to another within the organization (Ford and Chan, 2003: 12), one of the important aspects of knowledge sharing is learning. On a personal level, people take part in knowledge sharing activities in order to acquire new knowledge (Li, 2010:40). According to Brown and Duguid (2001:200), 'learning is inevitably implied in the acquisition of knowledge', so learning plays a central role in knowledge sharing. Hence, as an individual, one of the reasons to engage in knowledge sharing is to acquire new knowledge and it is in this process that one learns. This should be a continuous process since once an individual acquires knowledge and learns something new, they should in turn impart this knowledge to other people. On an organizational level, knowledge sharing assists with organizational learning; in its absence the gap between individual and organizational knowledge widens (Ford and Chan, 2003:12). Peltokorpi (2006:139) mentions that knowledge sharing promotes widespread learning, and minimizes the likelihood of wasting resources to solve the same problem repeatedly.

- **Create competitive advantage** – Creation of a competitive advantage is one of the key elements for information and knowledge. One way to ensure that this happens is to share information and knowledge. By allowing the widespread dissemination of information and knowledge within the organization, the organization gains that unique element that will increase its knowledge base. This in turn increases competitive advantage for the organization. Knowledge sharing moves tacit knowledge that resides with individuals to an organizational level where it is converted into economic and competitive value for the organization (Peltokorpi, 2006:139). Knowledge sharing generates knowledge that is personal to a specific organization, hence providing a uniqueness that can lead to sustained competitive advantage. Furthermore, in order to remain competitive and innovative, knowledge sharing is important as firms may generate new work methods, as well as business opportunities (Jonsson and Kalling, 2007:162).
- **Best practices** – An organization secures the diffusion of best practices through knowledge sharing (Husted and Michailova, 2002:6).
- **Job satisfaction and motivation** – Knowledge sharing has been linked to job satisfaction and motivation owing to increased social interaction and overlapping cognition (Peltokorpi, 2006:140).

3.2.3.3 Forms of knowledge sharing

Now that knowledge sharing has been highlighted, the next question to ask is 'how does knowledge sharing happen'? Since information and knowledge sharing is an important activity in the organization, finding an ideal path to share this knowledge is critical. The method of knowledge sharing should, therefore, take into account the different barriers that may influence the effective smooth sharing of information and knowledge. These barriers can be on an individual or organizational level. In a multicultural environment, information and knowledge sharing can be difficult especially owing to peoples' different cultures, which in turn affect the way that they engage with information and knowledge sharing.

Li (2010:40) mentions that the form of engagement can be by contributing ideas, negotiating the meaning of knowledge, or absorbing and making sense of others' ideas in order to use them for future tasks; therefore, knowledge sharing activities include both knowledge contributing and consuming aspects. In essence, knowledge

involves a giver and a receiver. The distance between the two can be the limiting factor for smooth information knowledge sharing. The attitude of both the receiver and the giver can also be a limiting factor for effective smooth information and knowledge sharing.

Information and knowledge sharing can occur both informally in places such as the corridor and formally (Nayir and Uzuncarsili, 2008:143). The following are some of the different ways in which information and knowledge sharing can take place:

- Face-to-face meetings – this can be both formal and informal
- Electronic communication – this can involve e-mail, and social networks
- Formal reports
- Interpersonal interaction
- Meetings and forums
- Conferences, workshops, seminar
- Peer assist
- After action review.

Peltokorpi (2006:139) mentions that while information and knowledge sharing can occur in different forms and through different channels, emphasis here is placed on shared knowledge through interpersonal interaction. This form of interaction, according to Peltokorpi (2006:139) and Nonaka (1994), is the most effective way to share tacit knowledge because it conveys both verbal and non-verbal meaning (through body language, eye contact, and facial interactions). Interpersonal interaction as a form information and knowledge sharing can be hindered by factors such as language barriers. However, it seems that this is a lucrative form of knowledge sharing. To support this statement, scholars have claimed that use of language in social interaction is the principle vehicle for the transmission of knowledge and the means through which people gain access to the contents of others' minds (Peltokorpi, 2006:139).

3.2.3.4 Success factors for knowledge sharing

Information and knowledge sharing as, mentioned before, is critical for the organization. In this knowledge era it is important that information and knowledge sharing become a continuous process in order to yield the benefits of knowledge

sharing. After having highlighted the importance of information and knowledge sharing, and the different forms of knowledge sharing, looking at the different critical success factors for knowledge sharing will be important. Ford and Chan (2003:13) mention that it is important to understand how knowledge exists and is managed within organizations that combine multiple cultures. The following are important factors, which allow knowledge sharing to occur:

- Efficient knowledge sharing involves direct commitment on both sides of the exchange, both on the transmitter and the receiver side (Hutchings and Michailova, 2006:23). As mentioned earlier, information and knowledge sharing is voluntary and an individual must make a decision to engage in knowledge sharing. Without commitment on both sides of the exchange, efforts to improve information and knowledge sharing can be futile.
- For knowledge sharing to become a reality, you have to create a climate of trust in your organization (Dulaimi, 2007:555). Once an environment of trust is established in an organisation, sharing becomes more natural. In so doing a knowledge sharing culture is created, which is important to improve information and knowledge sharing.
- Common language (Ford and Chan, 2003:13). If we all spoke the same language, information and knowledge sharing would be smooth flowing, or at least language barriers would be one less barrier to worry about. In Japan for instance, they have successful knowledge sharing and one of the reasons is because they have a common language so it is much easier to understand each other. A lack of a common language can, therefore hinder smooth information and knowledge sharing. A common language can also be in the form of jargon, for example, terms that are common to lawyers, medical doctors, engineers, and so on.

3.3 Knowledge management and culture

For knowledge management to thrive in organizations today there is need to have an understanding of culture and how it has an influence on knowledge management. Organizations are growing bigger, which has also seen an increase in diverse workforces. Diversified companies normally have a number of languages spoken amongst employees, not to mention different ethnic groups and tribes, all adding to the task at hand with regard to successful knowledge management (King, et al.,

2007:286). Culture has a big effect on individuals' behaviours. Hence it is, therefore, important to have an understanding of culture and how it influences knowledge management. Named as the biggest barrier to knowledge management success by 37.8 per cent of respondents in a survey held by Knowledge Management Review (King et al., 2007:286), culture is by no means a minor issue and demands concentrated attention from knowledge management practitioners.

Culture influences the way we think, behave and the way in which we manage knowledge. Culture defines who we are, which certainly has an effect on knowledge management, hence the need to have a better understanding of culture and knowledge management. Tacit knowledge is based on personal experiences and socio-cultural contexts (Peltokorpi, 2006:139). Because culture involves programming of the mind it becomes difficult to separate knowledge management activities, especially knowledge sharing, with culture. Knowledge sharing does not occur in a vacuum, as it requires people to interact with each other. Hence, there is a direct interaction with someone's culture, since culture defines who we are.

3.4 Knowledge sharing and culture

Information and knowledge sharing is critical for the success of a knowledge management system in any organization. Recent research on organizational learning and knowledge creation indicates that knowledge sharing, communication, and learning in organizations are profoundly influenced by cultural values of individual employees (Ardichvili et al., 2006:94). With culture being one of the biggest barriers to this especially in this globalised world, the following section devotes a lot of attention to culture and knowledge sharing.

As the trend of globalization, internationalization, strategic alliances, mergers, and acquisitions continues, the need has never been greater to understand the complicated process of knowledge sharing among organizational members in cross-cultural contexts (Li, 2010:38; Sackmann and Friesl, 2007:142). This has increased levels of diversity with people from different cultural and organizational backgrounds who come together. This complicates the process of information and knowledge sharing. There is an increase in heterogeneity within organizations, which may become one of the major factors that may impede information and knowledge sharing.

National culture influences the way that people conduct knowledge sharing by shaping their knowledge sharing attitudes and impacting their cognitive styles (Li, 2010:38; Bhagat, Kedia, Harveston and Triandis, 2002:205; Ford and Chan, 2003:13). As seen in the previous chapter, culture influences a big part of peoples' behaviours. Knowledge sharing involves two or more parties and our different cultural backgrounds, and social patterns may stand in the way of making information and knowledge sharing a success. Some of these behaviours are not intentional, but only programmed in our minds. Because peoples' cultures are different this, therefore, warrants differences in behaviours. Different ethnic groups have been found to have preferences for symbolic versus semantic learning and cognition, and for different forms of verbal and visual presentation of information and learning content (Ginsburg et al., 1981⁸ cited by Ardichvili, et al., 2006:95). Therefore, based on our cultures, individuals have different ways of participating in knowledge sharing.

Studies, which investigate the effectiveness of knowledge sharing found that cultural differences impact information flows and knowledge sharing, and concluded that the cultural distance within firms increases the difficulty of performing information and knowledge sharing (Ford and Chan, 2003:13). Culture shapes individuals and, influences one's habits, communication styles, language, and logic. Culture informs us how to behave in a given situation (Peltokorpi, 2006:138).

3.4.1 Influences of culture on information and knowledge sharing

National cultures influence a person's actions, either by the in-built values towards, which the actions are oriented, or by shaping a repertoire of strategies of action, which favour or discourage certain patterns of action (Hutchings and Michailova, 2006:27). National culture also influences the way that all people in a society think, how they view their duties, collect information, respond to others and express their feelings (King, 2008:40). Information and knowledge sharing is largely dependent on the way we feel, the way we act, how we see relationships and certainly this is largely what culture is all about. In essence, it is difficult to separate information and knowledge sharing from culture. The way that an individual was raised, their language, and how they see relationships have a big influence on how they perceive information and knowledge sharing, both consciously and sub-consciously. Other

⁸ Ginsburg, H., Posner, J. and Russell, R. 1981. The development of knowledge concerning written arithmetic: a cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Psychology*, 16(1):13-35.

cultural influences are a result of external factors such as government policies. Other factors are as a result of gender, or disability. It should be noted, however, that the problems with knowledge sharing are likely to be heightened where the gap between cultures is great, as cultural differences do make significant differences to the way in which individuals behave in organisations (Hutchings and Michailova, 2004:86). With all this in mind, it is necessary to therefore have an understanding of the influence of culture on information and knowledge sharing. The following are cultural factors that may influence information and knowledge sharing:

- Language
- Government policies
- Cultural dimensions
 - Individualism and collectivism
 - Power distance
 - Masculinity
 - Uncertainty avoidance
 - Long-term orientation.

3.4.1.1 Language

Polanyi (1958⁹) cited by Renzl (2005:46) coined a statement, “we know more than we can tell”. Basically, our inability to clearly express our ideas verbally does not mean that we do not have knowledge. Fluency in a particular language can be the limiting factor to information and knowledge sharing. Language plays a big part in information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse organisation. Since information and knowledge sharing involves conveying speech, language becomes a critical factor. In one company there can be various languages spoken and employees are more than likely comfortable speaking their home language. However, this is not the case in most organisations and usually there is a dominant language, or the formal language of addressing each other within the company. Finestone and Snyman (2005:131) mention that language barriers influence knowledge sharing because people will be reluctant to share if they cannot understand concepts in a language well or communicate their opinions clearly. They further state that perceptions of intelligence can be influenced by a person’s command of the business language. Because of our various social and cultural

⁹ Polanyi, M. 1958. *Personal knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

backgrounds, not everyone can speak the business language well. It is not always easy to express one's views simply because of a lack of proficiency in business language. This lack of proficiency may result in an employee not sharing their knowledge within the company. Language difficulties can easily result in misunderstandings and frustrations. This in turn presents a limitation to information and knowledge sharing. A shared common language enhances knowledge sharing. In other words, different cultures, vocabularies, and frames of reference create friction in the knowledge sharing process (Davenport and Prusak, 1998:28).

On an international scale, Leveson and Joiner (2009:380) describe foreign managers who work in the UK reporting language problems as a main source of dissatisfaction, frustration and friction with their UK colleagues and as contributing to their sense of being an outsider. This usually happens when dealing with a company from a different country. When striving for information and knowledge sharing, negative factors such as dissatisfaction, frustration and friction because of language differences should be eliminated. The issue of language being a barrier of information and knowledge sharing is a global problem, as seen in the previous example. With the global world becoming much smaller, a lot of companies are doing business across borders, which brings several cultures together in one country. Language can become a huge barrier in such scenarios.

3.4.1.2 Government policies

To be able to balance the cultural imbalances in an industry, a lot of governments have introduced policies that allow some form of equality with the corporate environment. These policies have been established to empower previously disadvantaged groups.

In the South African context, one of the factors that affect information and knowledge sharing is the policy of the Affirmative Action, which, according to Finestone and Snyman (2005:130), has the potential to cause a different kind of social dilemma. In empowering one group whilst sanctioning another, job security is influenced, which consequently leads to an unwillingness among people to share knowledge.

In Australia, the approach of managing cultural diversity is influenced by government policy, which seeks to manage work place diversity in all forms- not only racial and ethnic, but also on the basis of age, gender, physical ability and sexual orientation

(Leveson and Joiner, 2009:378). This policy, which is known as “productive diversity”, seeks to align diversity management with the national economic forum agenda. This policy also seeks to promote effective management in order to capitalize on linguistic and cultural skills, knowledge of overseas markets and business experience of people overseas. Policies therefore, play a big role in managing diversity in various countries globally.

In countries such as Malaysia, policies have been introduced because of the historical role and power of ethnic and religious minorities to assist mainstream indigenous communities (Bhaskaran and Sukumaran, 2007:55). These policies generally provide incentives that encourage communities to participate in economic development. Basically, policies identify disadvantaged groups and give them a chance to participate. This can improve information and knowledge sharing, but it can also have a limiting factor like in the South African situation.

3.4.1.3 Cultural dimensions

Cultural attributes such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance indicate with whom people interact, and informs them how to behave in interactions (Peltokorpi, 2006:140). As seen from the previous chapter, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions play a huge role when dealing with understanding cultural diversity. Sondgaard (1994:449) examined reviews, citations and replications of Hofstede’s work, and determined that between 1980 and 1994, 1036 quotations from his book, *Culture’s Consequences*, appeared in journals. He concluded that Hofstede’s work was based on “a rigorous research design, a systematic data collection and a coherent theory to explain national variation”. Hofstede’s work has a huge impact when trying to understand how culture influences organisations. His work is quite reliable and even other frameworks, which have profiled culture have referred to his work (for example, Maznevski¹⁰, et al., 2002; The Globe study, cited by Rao, 2009:167). Table 3.1 summarizes these cultural dimensions and how they have an influence on information and knowledge sharing.

¹⁰ Maznevski, M., Nason, S. And DeStefano, J. 1993. Fourteen faces of culture: A new instrument for understanding cultural differences. A paper presented at the academy of International Business, Annual meeting, Maui, Hawaii, October.

Table 3.1: Information and knowledge sharing in culturally diverse environments
(Source: Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009:5)

| Dimension | Characteristic relating to KM | Trust | Knowledge sharing |
|----------------------------|--|-------|---|
| High power distance | Authoritative leadership, centralised decision structures, inequality between higher ups and downs | Low | If instruction requires it |
| Low power distance | Participative leadership, decentralised decision structures | High | A natural process |
| High uncertainty avoidance | Suspiciousness about innovations and new knowledge, uncertainty for ambiguous situations | Low | Should be enforced by regulations and instructions |
| Low uncertainty avoidance | Problem solving tasks preferred | High | Expected |
| Masculinity | Assertiveness, sympathy for strong | Low | Hiding of knowledge for competition reasons |
| Feminity | Co-operation important sympathy for weak | High | A basic value |
| Individualism | I consciousness | Low | If personal advantage can be identified |
| Collectivism | In-groups | High | Trust should be established before any knowledge sharing can take place between in- and out- groups |
| | Out-groups | Low | |

The following section discusses in detail how culture, based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions has an influence on information and knowledge sharing.

3.4.1.3.1 Individualism and collectivism

Individualism can be regarded as a prime orientation to the self and collectivism as a prime orientation to the common goals and objectives (Richards, Busch, and Venkitachalam 2007:175). This has a huge influence on information and knowledge sharing. Individualism and collectivism defines our organisational behaviour, therefore, since we come from different cultures, one individual may have individualism traits while another may have collectivism traits. Richards et al. (2007:175) further states the implications of individualism and collectivism regarding information and knowledge sharing. She states that collectivists are likely to share their knowledge with their in-group, but hoard it from the out-group while individualists are likely to hoard knowledge for themselves, but when they choose to share they are less restrictive with whom they share. People in collectivist cultures may have that cooperation attribute, but when it comes to information and knowledge sharing, they tend to keep it within their in-group. Peltokorpi (2006:140) mentions that this is because such cultures tend to feel a moral obligation towards in-groups, and a lack of interest in those that are considered as belonging to out-groups. In

contrast, people in individualistic cultures may share knowledge with anyone, but there is also a high chance of them holding on to their own knowledge, Chow et al. (2000:65) refers to it as knowledge hoarding.

Bhagat et al. (2002:4-7) identify some of the distinctions between individualism and collectivism. This is crucial for this research since diverse organisations contain both individualism and collectivism. In some countries such as Japan diversity may not be an issue since, all employees will have the same cultural backgrounds. Table 3.2 below outlines cultural differences in knowledge sharing.

Table 3.2: Cultural differences in information and knowledge sharing (Source: Bhagat et al., 2002:4-7)

| Individualist | Collectivist |
|--|---|
| Place personal goals ahead of larger social group for example organisation | Gives priority to the goals of the larger social collective group before self |
| See themselves independent of others | See themselves as interdependent of others |
| Tend to see a piece of information independent of its context | Look for contextual clues in information |
| Emphasize on written or codified form of information | Tend to disregard information in writing |
| Low context styles meaning is not readily available, more emphasis is placed on written words, such as e-mails or online discussion groups | High context styles- people rely on the context of non-verbal actions, therefore, tend to prefer communication media with high media richness such as face-to-face and/or phone calls |

3.4.1.3.2 Power distance

Power distance, as seen in the previous chapter, is one of the cultural factors that might have an influence on information and knowledge sharing. Societies can have either high or low power distances.

- **High power distance**

- Ford and Chan (2003:14) mention that countries that have high power distances may have more hierarchical structures; therefore, knowledge may be more likely to flow from the top down, or may be more limited than knowledge flows within cultures that have less power distance. Because of this high power distance, it can be difficult for people who have knowledge at the lower levels of the hierarchy to share knowledge upwards. However, knowledge from the higher levels can easily flow towards the lower levels, which may be owing to the assumption that knowledge from the higher levels of the chain has

more value. So in this instance, the cultural factor of power difference can limit knowledge sharing going to the higher hierarchical levels but can create an easy flow of knowledge the other way round. In cultures that have low power distance, this is unlikely to occur.

- Power distance may also influence knowledge sharing in another way – in terms of whether or not it occurs at all. Within a culture that has high power distance, if top management deems knowledge sharing as important in which employees should participate, then it is more likely to occur (Ford and Chan, 2003:14). Because of the power the higher level has, it is easy to make decisions that will ensure that knowledge sharing will occur. Additionally, the people on the lower levels, based on their cultures, will have a high power distance mentality and, therefore, will respond positively to such instructions from a higher power. This is unlikely in a culture that has low power distance.

- **Low power distance**

- Conversely, cultures that have low power distance may have more bottom-up knowledge sharing as individuals within the lower strata will feel more at ease to voice their opinions to their superiors (Ford and Chan, 2003:14). Because of the lower power distance, communicating opinions or ideas to higher hierarchy levels is not difficult because culture, in this case, allows such interactions to take place smoothly. The gap between those that have power and those that do not is much smaller, which creates an information and knowledge sharing environment.

3.4.1.3.3 Masculinity

Cultures that are high in masculinity, (namely competitiveness) may also have more difficulty with knowledge sharing if the competitiveness is between individuals and not only between organisations (Ford and Chan, 2003:13). Ideally, the organisation should promote working together as a team for the greater goal, which is the company. However, because of our cultures, some individuals will have high competitiveness. Instead of sharing knowledge within the confines of the company, knowledge will be regarded as a competitive edge over other individuals. Such scenarios will see individuals who hold on to knowledge without sharing it.

A high score (masculine) on this dimension indicates that the society by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the winner / best in field – a value system that starts in school and continues throughout organisational behaviour. A low score (feminine) on the dimension means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life.

3.4.1.3.5 Long-term orientation

A culture, which has long-term orientation will strive for long-term goals. People that have such cultures are more future-oriented and whatever they do will have a long-term reward. With this in mind, members of long-term oriented cultures will be more willing to participate actively in knowledge management processes, which do not usually generate immediate results (for example, repository development, identification and use of knowledge experts, knowledge sharing, knowledge use and so on). On the contrary, individuals of a short-term oriented culture may 'give up' on knowledge management processes owing to a lack of immediate evidence of their effectiveness (Ford and Chan, 2003:14).

3.4.2 Influences of culture on information and knowledge sharing in South Africa

Information and knowledge sharing, as discussed in previous sections, is highly influenced by culture. South African companies are faced with a huge challenge as far as cultural diversity and knowledge sharing is concerned. South Africa is a culture-rich country and because of this the workplace has a variety of individuals from different cultures working together. With a variety of languages, races, ethnic groups it becomes inevitable to forgo how culture influences information and knowledge sharing. The main problem is that not much research has been conducted in this area in South Africa. The two main research works in the area of information and knowledge sharing in South Africa are by Finestone and Snyman (2005) and King et al. (2007). Both these researches covered the issue of information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse environment such as South Africa. A lot of their literature is referred to in this section since it is the most relevant and is specifically directed towards South Africa. The following are some of the influences of culture on information and knowledge sharing in South Africa.

- Language
- Education
- Government policies
- Communication styles.

3.4.2.1 Language

South Africa has many languages. In fact there are eleven official languages. The country's Constitution guarantees equal status to 11 official languages to cater for the country's diverse peoples and cultures (South Africa.info). English is the official business language and it is largely spoken in the business and education sector. With such a diversity of languages, one can only imagine working in an environment where you can possibly find people from 11 different languages. Finestone and Snyman (2005:131) and King et al.(2007:287) mention that language barriers influence information and knowledge sharing because people tend to be reluctant to share if they cannot understand concepts in a language well or communicate their opinions. Basically, if an individual is not fluent in a language, they may find it difficult to share their information and knowledge. This is not a result of their lack of knowledge, but is because of their lack of grammatical ability, or construction of sentences. This can be frustrating and it is certainly a barrier to information and knowledge sharing in South Africa.

Polanyi (1966)¹¹ coined a powerful statement, namely "we know more than we can tell", which may be proof that language can be a huge barrier to information and knowledge sharing. This language barrier severely affects communication in an organisation where communication is part of information and knowledge sharing. So in the case of South Africa, language can play a big part in influencing information and knowledge sharing.

3.4.2.2 Education background

King et al. (2007:297) mention that the education that a person receives also has a direct impact on the likelihood that an individual will share knowledge. The education

¹¹ Polanyi, M. 1966. *The tacit dimension*. London: Routledge.

system in South Africa produces different types of students. This can largely be attributed to the type of teaching, the class or status of the school, and the location of the school. Some schools have developed curricula that prepare students for the work environment, where business etiquette is addressed, and students are taught how to conduct themselves in a professional manner.

3.4.2.3 Government policies

Government policies, as seen in the previous section, also play a pivotal role in the process of information and knowledge sharing. Policies in many countries have been used to empower previously disadvantaged or oppressed groups in a country. The South African government tried to eradicate previous practices by introducing policies to aid the empowerment of previously disempowered groups such as Blacks, women and disabled people (Finestone and Snyman, 2005:131), which led to the formulation of the *Employment Equity Act* of 1998.

3.4.2.4 Communication styles

In South Africa people who come from different backgrounds have different communication styles. Communication plays a crucial role in information and knowledge sharing, and differences in communication styles can easily lead to misunderstandings, which in turn can affect the smooth flow of information and knowledge. White South Africans, for instance, predominately adhere to western culture, preferring explicit styles of communication such as written commitments, (namely contracts) as the main indication of trust. In contrast, Black South African cultures are more implicit in their manner of communication, in which oral communication is preferred (King et al., 2007:287). This has a lot to do with our cultural behaviours, especially individualism and collectivism. Individualists prefer particular forms of communication as opposed to collectivists.

3.4.2.5 Race relations

Culture defines the way people socialise, the way we communicate, our language, our thinking patterns, behaviours and attitudes, among other things. Socialisation can play a big role in information and knowledge sharing. In South Africa there is still a big gap in the area of interaction between ethnic and racial groups. In actual fact there is still some tension among races even though on the surface it does not seem

this way. Peoples' social patterns are easily determined by their race and probably by their status in society as well.

Results from the South African Reconciliation Barometer indicate that South Africans still do not interact with persons from different race groups in their daily lives, either in the workplace or at home. The 2009 survey reveals that about one in four (24%) South Africans indicated that they never speak to people of other races “on a typical day during the week, whether at work or otherwise” (SA Reconciliation Barometer, 2009:21).

The figures below provide an indication of the gap between races in South Africa. Information and knowledge sharing involves a lot of socialization. These figures represent a totally different story and for information and knowledge sharing to work to its maximum potential, there is need to overcome this barrier.

Figure 3.1: Race interactions at work (On a typical day during the week, whether at work or otherwise, how often do you talk to people from racial groups other than your own? [% responded 'never'])

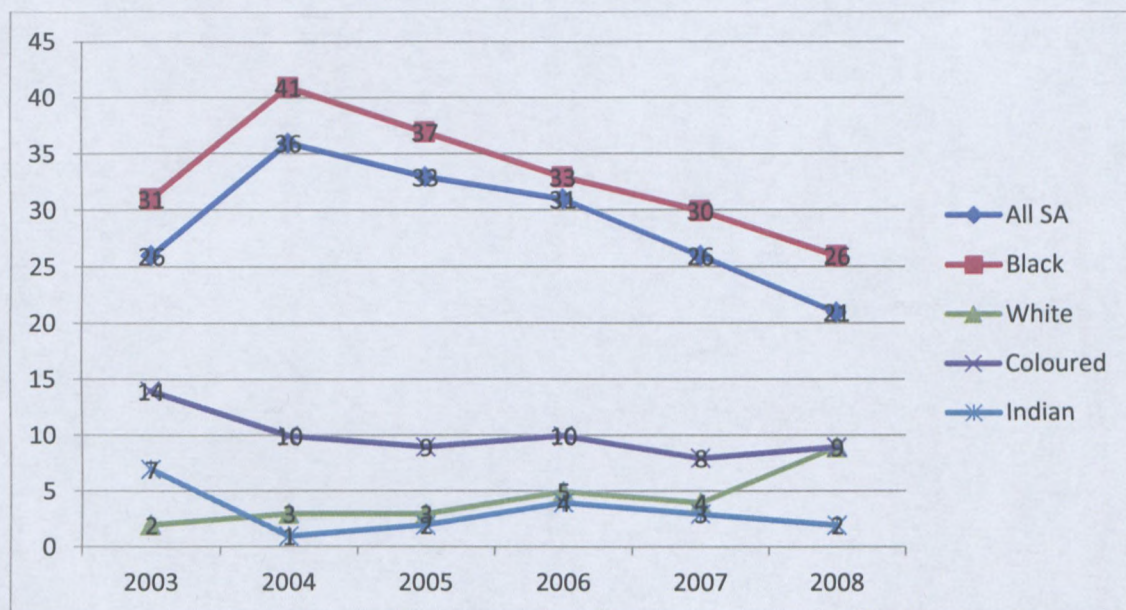
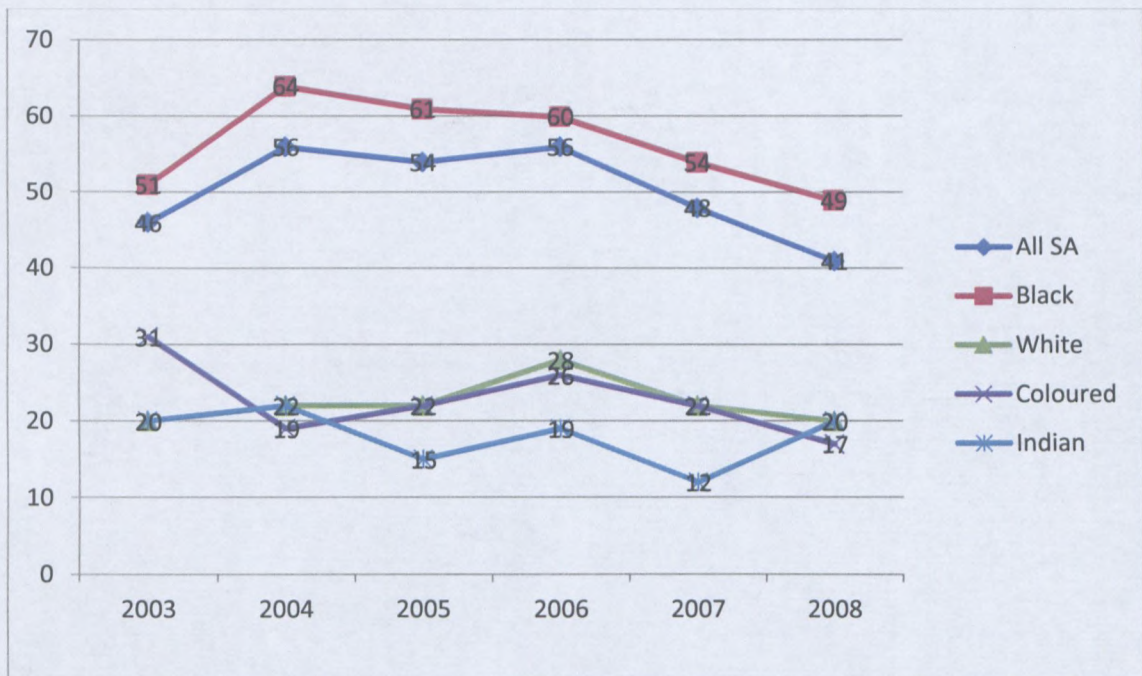


Figure 3.2: Race interactions in homes (When socialising in your home or the home of friends, how often do you socialise with people from other racial groups? [% Optimism/Agreement])



3.5 Summary

As seen in this chapter, culture plays a big role in information and knowledge sharing. For information and knowledge sharing to take place effectively, there is a need to have harmony in the workplace. This is not easy to achieve in a culturally diverse organisation because there are several cultural barriers that can limit this. Some of these cultural barriers are not intentional, but only a result of the programming of the mind. In other instances these cultural barriers are intentional and are a result of individuals not engaging in learning new ways of doing things.

As seen in the chapter, the following are issues that can determine information and knowledge sharing in an organisation. Below are some of the areas that should be addressed in order to effectively achieve information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse organisation:

- Language
- Government policies
- Cultural dimensions
- Education

- Communication styles
- Management styles
- Race relations.

Furthermore, Ford and Chan (2003:15) developed a summary that concludes how knowledge sharing can be influenced by culture:

- Cultures that are high on individualism may have more difficulty in knowledge sharing than cultures that are high on collectivism.
- Cultures that are high on power distance may have a more top-down flow of knowledge than cultures that are low on power distance.
- Cultures that are high in masculinity may have less knowledge sharing amongst organisational members if competition is individually based. There may be no difference if competitiveness is organisationally based.
- Knowledge sharing between heterogeneous cultural groups may be more difficult (that is, require more time and effort) than knowledge sharing within a homogenous cultural group.

These are some of the issues that are further addressed in the research to try to make more sense of the issue of information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse environment.

CHAPTER FOUR: Research design and methodology

4.1 Introduction

According to Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005:2), research is a process that involves obtaining scientific knowledge by means of various objective methods and procedures. In order to achieve this, there must be a specific research methodology that should be used, while the chosen methodology is largely dependent on the research problem, questions and objectives. The research process does not depend on personal feelings or personal opinions and with this in mind, research methods should be systematic, purposeful and obtained through valid and reliable procedures.

4.2 Research problem, questions and objectives

As seen in the previous chapters, this research seeks to investigate how issues concerning cultural diversity in the workplace have an influence on information and knowledge sharing. The objective is to determine the current trend of information and knowledge sharing in South African SMEs in multicultural organisations. This should determine to what extent employees interact and communicate with each other.

In order to answer these research questions this researcher had to conduct a literature study, which formed a background and understanding of culture, information and knowledge sharing. These chapters provided direction on how the actual research would be conducted. Chapter 2 identified how culture is programmed in our minds and how it determines and influences our behaviours, which can occur consciously or sub-consciously. Chapter 2, based on the existing literature found that culture:

- is found in a group setting
- is shared
- has an influence on behaviour, attitudes and values
- is learned, historical and built over time
- involves solving problems, questions and dilemmas
- has an influence on communication
- is a result of inter-personal interactions.

Additionally, culture is affected by our cultural dimension, which was also outlined in Chapter 2. Hofstede's model, in Section 2.3.4 profiles, peoples' different cultures. As seen in the literature, it is such cultural dimensions that determine our information and knowledge sharing behaviours. Chapter 3 investigated how individuals' culture affects the way that they perceive information and knowledge sharing. Culture actually has an influence on how individuals perceive information and knowledge sharing, particularly issues on language, education, communication styles, social backgrounds, race relations, and cultural dimensions. So based on the literature study the above, mentioned factors may determine information and knowledge sharing in South African SMEs.

In order to achieve the objective of this research and to answer the research questions a suitable research design and methodology was chosen. Flick, (2007:36) defines research design as a plan for collecting and analysing evidence that will make it possible for the investigator to answer whatever questions that he or she has posed. Issues regarding culture and how it affects information and knowledge sharing can be sensitive, emotional and personal. To be able to obtain reliable results and to answer the research question, personal interaction with respondents was the most appropriate way to conduct this research.

4.3 Qualitative research

Qualitative research can be defined as a research approach, which covers an array of techniques, which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning of naturally occurring phenomena in the social world (Welman et al., 2005:188). The aim as stated by Leedy and Omrod (2005:132) is to acquire an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon by using discussion. It is informative and can be conducted on a smaller but focused sample by using data collection methods such as observations, interviews, focus groups and open-ended questionnaires.

A qualitative approach to this research was not only appropriate, but also provided an in depth analysis of information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse environment. This research approach, therefore, allowed the researcher to have personal, in-depth encounters with the respondents. A qualitative approach would allow for a deeper understanding of peoples' behaviours in different companies when they participate in information and knowledge sharing. Information and knowledge

sharing can be a personal issue, especially when cultural influences are involved. Culture, as seen in Section 2.2.2, has an influence on behaviour, attitudes, values, hence tapping into such variables can best be done through personal, intimate encounters.

Morse and Richards (2002:28) mention that if the purpose of the research is to learn from the participants in a setting or process in the way that they experience it, the meaning they place on it, and how they interpret what they experience, one needs methods that will allow one to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations. Qualitative methods have the common goal of generating ways of seeing existing data. A qualitative approach allowed for a deeper understanding of employees and what they feel about their diversity. In order to conduct in-depth qualitative research, a case study was used.

4.4 Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research can follow different logics and can distinguish a more formalised sampling from a more purposive and flexible way of doing it (Flick, 2007:26). Because this research used a qualitative approach, a careful selection of sampling techniques had to be used. The purpose of qualitative sampling, as mentioned by Barbour (2008:36), is to reflect on the diversity within the group of people or phenomena under study rather than to select a typical case. In order to come up with an appropriate sampling technique for this research, it was essential to preview the various qualitative sampling techniques. It was only after this that an appropriate sampling technique was chosen and used in line with the research questions and objectives. The goal of qualitative sampling, as explained by Barbour (2008:53), is *not* to produce a representative sample, but is rather to reflect on diversity and provide as much potential for comparison as possible. This is interesting considering how this research is grounded in cultural diversity and how this can justify the researcher choosing cultural diverse variables/individuals in order to answer the research questions. The following section discusses some of the sampling techniques that are found in qualitative research.

4.4.1 Theoretical sampling

Theoretical sampling is when the researcher deliberately seeks out persons to be invited to participate according to the emerging *theoretical theme* (Richards and Morse, 2007:195). Theoretical sampling is basically sampling as the research progresses. Sampling is done based on emerging results, which determine who to talk to next. It is only after data has been collected that the researcher can decide what the next move will be.

4.4.2 Nominated or snowball sampling

Another method of qualitative sampling is nominated or snowball sampling. This is when participants in the study recommend other persons to be invited to participate (Richards and Morse, 2007:195). In some instances participants can be difficult to find, hence using such a method can be helpful. This method depends largely on networks of the individuals participating in the study, which will ultimately lead the researcher to other potential participants, who have more or less the same characteristics. This method was not the most appropriate way to approach this research, as it sought individuals who have diverse cultural backgrounds and who are representative of different levels of the organisational structure in a company.

4.4.3 Purposeful sampling

Purposeful sampling is when the investigator selects participants because of their characteristics; good informants/participates are those who know the information, which is required, and are willing to reflect on the phenomena of interest, have the time, and are willing to participate (Richards and Morse, 2007:195). In this research the required participants were from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the participants had to be at different levels in the organisational chart. This would provide a broader understanding of how information and knowledge sharing is influenced by cultural diversity. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:78) mention how purposive sample is chosen based on the research question. To answer the research question, a purposive sample had to be chosen for this research. To achieve this, sampling relied on selecting interview participants by virtue of characteristics thought by the researcher to be likely to have some bearing on their perceptions and experiences. This research employed purposive sampling, and the following section identifies participants for this purposive sample.

4.4.4 Selection of companies and respondents

This research targeted small companies in Cape Town that had a culturally diverse workforce. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa can be defined either by turnover or number of employees. In this instance the researcher used the number of employees as a definition of the SME. The reason for this was for this research to effectively identify the influence of culture on information and knowledge sharing, there was need for numbers. SMEs for this investigation comprised culturally diverse companies. This was critical for the successful completion of this research. Therefore, employees in the chosen SMEs came from different culture groups.

The main factors considered in the selection of these companies were:

- Language - the company had employees who spoke different home languages.
- Race - the employees came from different culture groups, for example, Afrikaners, English, Zulu, Indian, Xhosa and so on.
- Number of employees - since this research was targeted at small companies, an ideal number of employees involved between 15 and 30 employees.
- Sector - this research mainly targeted companies in the IT sector, mainly software development companies.

After consulting a directory of IT companies in Cape Town, the following software development companies were selected randomly. Because of confidentiality reasons, the companies are identified as company A-E. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with at least one person in each company. An additional two respondents were consulted on condition of availability. One major issue in small companies is that they are busy and barely have enough time to hold interviews with researchers. Two or three respondents from the five companies were interviewed. These respondents came from various cultural groups and held different positions within the company. Table 4.1 below profiles the companies and the respondents that were investigated for this research.

Table 4.1: Profile of companies and respondents

| | About the company | Services | No. of staff | Respondents |
|---|---|--|--------------|-------------|
| A | Company A is a Cape Town based systems house | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems solutions • System implementation • Systems training • Systems support • Systems development • Database design | 20 | 3 |
| B | Company B (based in Cape Town, South Africa) is a software development company providing software development services in Linux, Apache, MySQL and Python. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User requirement and systems specification • Software design • Software implementation • Application testing • Application deployment • Application support | 22 | 3 |
| C | This company does software solutions for small companies in Cape Town | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software development • Software training • Web development • Database design | 28 | 2 |
| D | This company is an information management systems company, which also does software development. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software solutions • Project management software development • Training • Data conversion • Web Portals • Information management systems | 25 | 3 |
| E | This company is a Cape Town based Business IT Services Provider. The company develops websites and software solutions, and also provides specialised internet and business communication solutions. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Software development • Software implementation • Website development • Business solutions • Network services | 32 | 2 |

4.5 Data collection procedures

This research employed interviews as a research instrument. Considering that issues regarding culture and how it influences someone's behaviour can be personal, interviews were seen as the best way forward to gain an understanding of peoples' cultures. According to Flick (2007:78), interviews are one of the dominant methods in qualitative research. There are various methods to conduct interviews and depending on the research question, an appropriate interviewing technique must be used. In qualitative interviews the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, interviews participants by telephone, or engages in focus group interviews with six to eight interviewees in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Creswell, 2009:181).The

type of interview decided on will depend largely on the research questions and research goals. To be able to choose the most appropriate interviewing technique, an understanding of potentially useful interviewing methods was deemed necessary.

4.5.1 Structured interviews

The interviewer poses a collection of questions from a previously compiled questionnaire, to a respondent face-to-face and records the latter's responses (Wellman et al., 2005:165). In a structured interview the researcher basically asks the same set of questions over and over, and these questions are based on a pre-determined set of questions. In the event that the respondent strays from the question, the researcher will have to guide them back to the topic at hand. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:125), a structured interview ultimately allows for a greater degree of comparison between interviews, which will make data analysis easier since all data will be based on the same kind of structure. However, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006:125) also argue that a qualitative research approach should give the respondent an opportunity to explain their experiences and perspectives about a matter. Therefore, less structure will allow for this to be achieved.

This option would have been too rigid for a qualitative approach to this research. The idea of the interview is to obtain in-depth information, hence a structured approach would not allow for the interviewer to adapt questions depending on the situation in the interview. Furthermore, this research also seeks to obtain peoples' personal experiences of culture. A structured form of the interview might hinder this. A structured interview was, therefore, omitted as one of the options to conduct the interviews.

4.5.2 Unstructured interviews

This is informal and can be used to explore a general area of interest in an in-depth manner. These are also known as in-depth interviews and there is no predetermined list of questions to work through, although the researcher should have a clear idea of the aspect that he or she wants to explore (Wellman et al., 2005:165). This is arguably one of the most common types of qualitative interviewing techniques. Since it is unstructured, it gives the respondent an opportunity to give an account of themselves with minimal interruptions. It is more like storytelling and the role of the researcher, according to Richards and Morse (2006:113), is to listen and let the

participant tell his or her story without interruption. Richards and Morse (2006:111) further identify the following as characteristics of unstructured interviews:

- Unstructured interviews have relatively few prepared questions; may be only one or more grand tour questions
- The researcher listens to and learns from the participant; and
- Unplanned, unanticipated questions may be used; also probes for clarifications.

This approach would have been good for this research, but this researcher believed that going to an interview without a schedule or guide might result in a chance of not asking all the essential questions. This researcher also believed that the respondents might need to be guided in order to obtain information, which is relevant to the research questions rather than to let them go on and on. A major advantage of this interview method would have been to go in-depth, personal and intimate with the respondents.

4.5.3 Semi-structured interviews

The researcher has a list of themes and questions to be covered, although these may vary from one interview to the next. Interview schedules and guides are used (Wellman, 2005:164). Semi-structured interviews allow the respondent some freedom to talk about what is of interest or important to them. Therefore, the respondent is not totally limited. However, the researcher will have knowledge about the study topic, which allows the researcher to come up with a set of questions, which is arranged in a logical sequence in order to suit the research question. Usually, the interviewer will ask the same questions of all participants, although not necessarily in the same order, whilst supplementing the main questions with either planned or unplanned probes (Richards and Morse, 2006:114). The following are some characteristics of semi-structured interviews, as identified by Richards and Morse (2006:111):

- Open-ended questions are developed in advance, along with prepared probes
- Unplanned, unanticipated probes may also be used.

This interview approach was the one used for this research. This approach is neither too structured nor unstructured, and provides a balance in the questioning approach. In spite of having some sort of structure and pre-determined questions, this approach will still allow for an in-depth encounter with the respondent, and in so doing, key data is obtained.

4.6 Interview design

Semi structured interviews, as mentioned in the previous section, were used to obtain information from the targeted population. The respondents for the interviews were initially contacted and given a brief outline of the aim of the study and what the study entails. The aim of the interviews was to obtain data about information and knowledge sharing on a much deeper and more intimate level. The researcher believes that issues relating to cultural backgrounds and information and knowledge sharing are personal.

The interview questions were divided into nine categories, which were derived for the previous chapters. The literature study managed to identify some cultural factors that might have an influence on information and knowledge sharing. Since the interviews were aimed at having in-depth encounters with the respondents, not many questions were designed, but the few questions that were used covered most of the desired intention of the research. The following are categories of the interview questions.

- *Demographic questions* – A set of demographic questions was designed for the interviews. The aim of this part of the interview was to obtain background information from respondents. Questions in this category essentially contributed to information and knowledge sharing and how it is affected by culture. Questions asked identified issues regarding age, years of completed education, nationality, home language, race and ethnicity. These variables contribute to what is defined as culture in Chapter 2.
- *Information and knowledge sharing* – These questions were aimed at identifying if respondents had a formal understanding of information and knowledge sharing. Responses in this section would help to map a way forward in terms of interaction with regard to the following questions. This would also determine the use of jargon during the interview. An understanding of the essence of information and knowledge sharing (Section

3.2.3 - 3.2.3.2) would improve the dialogue that would occur thereafter. Furthermore, this category of questions would also pose questions about information and knowledge sharing in general. These questions would provide foresight of whether the particular company has a culture of information and knowledge sharing. This section was covered in questions 1-4.

- *Information and knowledge sharing and culture* – This section covered general factors that might affect information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse environment. Issues such as trust, technology, motivation to share information and knowledge were covered. The questions were derived from Sections 3.2.3.2 to 3.2.3.4. Questions 5-8 covered this section.
- *Language and communication* – Language and communication, as seen in Chapters Two and Three, play a critical role in information and knowledge sharing in culturally diverse organisations (Sections 2.2.2.6; 3.4.1.1; 3.4.2.1 and 3.4.2.4). Language fluency can affect the way we communicate and this in turn can affect the way we participate in information and knowledge sharing. Question 9 addressed this issue.
- *Cultural dimensions* – Cultural dimensions, as seen in Chapters Two and Three also play a big role in information and knowledge sharing. First of all, cultural dimensions determine and shape our cultures as seen in Section 2.3. This in turn also affects the way we conduct information and knowledge sharing (Section 3.4.1.3). Questions 10 to 13 covered this issue.
- *Educational background* – Like culture, the type of education that we receive shapes our minds. In some schools pupils are taught the values of sharing, respect, assertiveness, and long-term goals, among other things. We carry these behaviours in our working lives and these in turn determine our information and knowledge sharing behaviours (Section 3.4.2.2). Question 14 covered this issue.
- *Race Relations* – As seen in Section 3.4.2.6, race relations can also influence information and knowledge sharing. Information and knowledge sharing can take place formally or informally (Section 3.2.3.3). If it takes place informally there is a large chance that socialising is involved. Question 15 seeks to identify if employees do socialise beyond their cultural borders in the workplace.

- *Government policies* – Government policies may influence peoples' attitudes towards information and knowledge (Section 3.4.1.2 and 3.4.2.3). Question 16 seeks to address this issue.
- *General comments* – These were the closing remarks of what the respondents thought about information and knowledge sharing in a culturally diverse environment. Question 17 addressed this.

4.7 Analysing the results

This research used qualitative research methodology. The researcher managed to obtain a significant amount of information from the respondents. Not all responses were similar, but the researcher managed to find a pattern where certain themes were repeated over and over again from the various respondents. With this in mind, the researcher had to choose an analysis method that would accommodate this. Another important consideration was the large amount of information obtained from the respondents, which had to be carefully analysed. For data analysis, content analysis was used.

4.7.1 Content analysis

Gray (2009:500) defines content analysis as the examination of qualitative data by either qualitative or quantitative methods by systematically identifying characteristics (classes or categories). From all the questions answered by the respondents, the researcher was able to pick up categories and themes that were recurring, which were used to analyse the results. Common classes were identified and these normally include age, gender, race, which were easily picked up by the demographic questions that the respondents had to reveal.

Theoretical classes were also identified and these are classes that arise from the process of analysing the data, which is identified, providing key linkages and patterns (Gray, 2009:500). One of the key steps when analysing qualitative data, as noted by (Flick, 2006:324), is to reduce the volume of textual materials. It is easy to get information overload and in the process fail to analyse the data. Therefore Flick, (2009:325) distinguishes three steps in the analysis process:

- Summarising content analysis, where the material is *paraphrased*, with similar paraphrases bundled together and less relevant passages eliminated.
- Explicating content analysis, which clarifies ambiguous or contradictory passages by introducing context material into analysis.
- Structured content analysis seeks to identify types of formal structures in the material. Hence, the analysis might extricate key features in the material and describe them in more detail.

4.8 Summary

With five companies and a targeted three respondents from each company, the empirical work for this research was able to acquire some valuable information relating to information and knowledge sharing. With at least three interviews being conducted in each of the five companies, this gave the researcher a personal encounter with the respondents. This was necessary to obtain sensitive information on peoples' different culture and how they share information and knowledge amongst each other. On average, the interviews took about 30 to 40 minutes. Issues on culture can sometimes be sensitive hence respondents were not always willing to reveal information.

The following chapter presents and discusses findings from the investigation.

CHAPTER FIVE: Findings and analysis

5.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, this research used semi-structured interviews as the main research tool. An interview guide with eight sections was designed. All questions for the interview were derived from Chapters two and three. Five companies were studied in-depth for this research, while the researcher managed to obtain insight from various culture groups within the companies. A large volume of information was acquired from these companies and it is the aim of this chapter to present the findings from the companies. All of the chosen companies did software development. The average number of employees in these companies was twenty as seen in Section 4.4.4. A detailed list of the selected companies was provided in the previous chapter.

This chapter addresses the following research sub-question:

“To what extent do employees in South African SMEs share information and knowledge with other employees regardless of their social and cultural differences?”

5.2 Findings and analysis of the findings

Seventeen questions were asked during the interview process. These questions were sub-divided into different categories, and each question is presented in this chapter. A summary of what the 13 respondents said in the interviews is also shown. Because of the large volume of information obtained from the respondents, the researcher found it fitting to mainly use a descriptive narrative of what the respondents said, whilst highlighting the main recurring points.

5.2.1 Review of questions

The following are different categories of questions, which were posed to respondents. Nine categories of questions were asked (Section 4.7), namely:

- Demographic details
- Information and knowledge sharing
- Information and knowledge sharing and culture
- Language and communication
- Cultural dimensions
- Educational background
- Race relations.

Findings from the interviews and the analysis of those findings by the researcher are presented in detail in the following section.

5.2.2 Demographic questions

As explained in Section 4.6, this section aimed to gather personal information from respondents. This was mainly to obtain an overview of the demographics (such as age, race, language and gender) from the different culture groups. Table 5.1 summarizes the results obtained from the questions regarding demographics of the interviewees.

The companies had an average of twenty employees but not all employees were interviewed. As seen in Table 5.1, the companies that were investigated had diverse cultural groups. Section 4.4.4 discussed how these companies and the respondents were selected.

5.2.3. Information and knowledge sharing

These questions were aimed at identifying respondents' understanding of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing. Another aim was to investigate if the companies had a policy that defined knowledge management for the company. Questions 1-3 answered this section.

Table 5.1: Demographic information of respondents

| Respondent & position | Home language | Nationality | Race | Gender | Age |
|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|--------|-------|
| 1:Managing director | English | English (UK) | White | Male | 60+ |
| 2:Founder/ MD | English | South African | Indian | Male | 40-49 |
| 3:Founder/ Director | English | South African | Indian | Female | 30-34 |
| 4:Founder/ Director | Afrikaans | South African | White | Male | 40-49 |
| 5:Director | Afrikaans | South African | White | Female | 40-49 |
| 6:Web designer | Xhosa | South African | Black | Male | 20-24 |
| 7:Software developer | Shona | Zimbabwean | Black | Male | 25-29 |
| 8:Senior developer | Afrikaans | South African | White | Male | 50-59 |
| 9:Business development manager | English | South African | White | Male | 30-34 |
| 10:Junior developer | Shona | Zimbabwean | Black | Male | 25-29 |
| 11:Research & Project manager | Afrikaans | South African | Coloured | Female | 30-34 |
| 12:Software developer | Xhosa | South African | Black | Male | 25-29 |
| 13:Database designer | Xhosa | South African | Black | Female | 25-29 |

Respondent 3 mentioned that knowledge sharing in this particular company improves the circulation and transfer of information and knowledge among its employees. Ideally, if one employee were to fall ill, another employee would be able to take over the project that they were doing because sharing takes place within the company. Employees gather together (meetings, forums, brainstorming sessions, blogs, training sessions) and discuss problems that they face in their various departments. By so doing, they share ideas and solutions and these are recorded on a wiki, repository or any other form of storage facility, which allows for future knowledge sharing. With knowledge shared in this way, it becomes easier for someone else to take over in a different project in the event that someone becomes ill or is not available, as illustrated by this respondent (director of Company B, Section 4.4.4):

In terms of the development process, it's important for us that all developers even if they are not on a project need to be able to help out on another project when somebody falls sick for say a week or something like that, so that's basically we reduce the risk of that. So say someone should fall sick for a week or two weeks, we can take out a developer put him on that project and he will have to know what the project is about, he'll have to acknowledge it, and immediately jump in and be effective. He might not be working on it at all times but he will be aware of the project and what's happening on the

project...

The director mentioned how they mainly used the internal repository, wiki and daily stand-up meeting as a way of knowledge sharing within the company.

In general, the respondents understood knowledge sharing as sharing by means of regular e-mailing, meetings, presentations, and training. In as much as some respondents did not have a clearer understanding of information and knowledge sharing, the general trend was that people appreciated sharing and had an idea of sharing techniques. Companies also seemed not to have a definition of information and knowledge sharing in their companies, but they actively encouraged it, particularly senior managers. Without a clearly defined knowledge sharing strategy or policy in some instances, the employees may not be aware that they are actually participating in information and knowledge sharing. However, because the companies strived for a culture of sharing information and knowledge (even though it was informal), employees in these small companies did participate in knowledge sharing consciously or sub-consciously. With this in mind, the issue of different culture groups seemed secondary since these were small companies and employees had to learn to appreciate each other more in spite of their cultural differences.

Most of the respondents identified some forms and methods with which they conducted information and knowledge sharing; these were discussed under Question 7. To summarize, information and knowledge sharing, as a concept, is not clearly defined in these small companies, although they do actively participate in the processes. Companies realize the importance and benefits of sharing. In general, (some informal) measures have been established to encourage information and knowledge sharing.

Analysis

In as much as most of the companies that were investigated have not formalized the definition of information and knowledge sharing, these companies seemed to support the idea of information and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing seemed to take place in a subtle way, but its presence was felt. Having spoken to the directors of all the companies, they all had a clear understanding of the benefits and the need for information and knowledge sharing. In general, all the small companies did not specifically maintain a knowledge management department since they are small, but as seen above, this did not necessarily disqualify the fact that they valued information

and knowledge sharing. Unlike larger companies, SMEs seem not to have a formal policy to establish good information and knowledge sharing practices, or a knowledge management policy to guide the effective transfer of information and knowledge within the company. As expected, knowledge sharing was more informal and this was largely owing to a lack of resources to solely focus on information and knowledge sharing. Larger companies may afford to have a separate department, which focuses on information and knowledge management. This is highly unlikely in smaller companies.

In addition to the above, these companies seemed to demonstrate an appreciation of information and knowledge sharing. Appreciation in this sense means that the companies are aware of the fact that knowledge does exist in their companies, while they also see a need to support ways and means to circulate it within the company, and hence increases the collective knowledge of the company as a whole. The companies are, therefore, fully aware of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing to the company and they need to create awareness of the importance of information and knowledge sharing. Employees might not particularly have a formal understanding of information and knowledge sharing, but they do participate in it. The company directors, as seen above, seemed to advocate different ways to encourage information and knowledge sharing in the companies. Because of the small size and the nature of the companies, it might be easier to *informally* participate in and monitor information and knowledge sharing in their companies. Culture might have been a limiting factor for information and knowledge sharing (as was discovered during the interviews), and this aspect is discussed below.

As far as sharing techniques were concerned, all the companies discussed above followed various approaches with which they did participate in sharing; this is further discussed in Section 5.2.4.4 below.

5.2.3.2 Question 2&3: Willingness to share information and knowledge with colleagues

These questions (2 and 3) sought to identify if employees found it easy to share information and knowledge with their colleagues. Culture, as a factor in this instance was crucial since employees could choose (consciously or subconsciously) with whom they would share knowledge. A person from one culture group (for example, a Xhosa) should be able to identify more easily with another Xhosa because they have

similarities (such as language, cultural backgrounds and values) and may find it easier to interact with each other. This applies to all races. This can happen unintentionally because individuals may identify more with someone from their same culture group and, furthermore, find it easier to share information and knowledge with them. In terms of sharing information and knowledge in spite of culture groups, some employees do not always make an effort to share information and knowledge with their colleagues (as seen in Chapter 3).

Findings

After interviewing the respondents, general trends were identified with regard to this question. First of all, the issue of the size of the company re-emerged from most of the respondents. In a small company of about 20 employees, individuals do not have the luxury to choose with whom they will and will not associate. The numbers are so small that they really have to work at creating better relationships with their counterparts. Because of this, the general trend that was found was that it was easier to build relationships in small companies and this was in spite of the different culture groups. This led to the aspect of family. Most respondents mentioned how they saw each other as family and the following is a specific example given by one of the respondents on the aspect of family:

...We are kind of like a family working together so everybody will know what they need to do but if they need help they will just involve somebody else...

Because of this "family" approach and in spite of cultural differences, employees would generally share with each other. In essence, cultural differences were absorbed into the idea of the company being a family. Employees did not see each other based on their cultural backgrounds, but rather as colleagues. Employees had good personal relationships with each other. Question 13 further discusses this point. With this in mind, it seemed that sharing was effective in these companies. However, there were a few incidents where this was not always the case. Some employees, as shown in the statement below quoted from one of the directors (Company B), were more individualistic in nature and preferred to work alone:

Some employees enjoy documentation and sharing, for others it is a bit of a mission with day to day tasks to solve. The company is however trying to enforce and encourage their employees to be open to information and knowledge sharing with each other.

Something profound about this statement was the issue of time and human resources as a limiting factor for sharing in small companies. Small companies have a limited number of human resources and time. Employees can, therefore, be too preoccupied with their day-to-day tasks, thus reducing the aspect of sharing.

Another respondent (Company C) mentioned his willingness to share especially when they deal with someone at the same level. They further stated that sometimes one can try to share with a colleague, but if they are at a different level of understanding, it can be difficult. When asked if this was a culture issue, the respondent mentioned that it had nothing to do with cultural differences. He stated that it can sometimes be difficult to get through to someone when giving advice, and this can be attributed to the attitude of the receiver. To encourage sharing, one respondent stated that:

We have staff development sessions a number of times per year, and it is at these sessions that employees have a real platform to do knowledge sharing with their colleagues.

One of the directors (Company B) mentioned how the company strives to see an information and knowledge sharing culture, where knowledge sharing is the order-of-the-day and employees do not have to struggle with the idea. Employees should not be forced or coerced into information and knowledge sharing, but rather they should have free will to do so. The employees (Company B), as mentioned by the director, know what they want to do; know what they want to achieve; enjoy what they do; and hence sharing amongst each is highly enabled. This director mentioned a statement, which is common in the company: "20% aptitude and 80% attitude will get you there".

Analysis

In general, employees seemed willing to share with each other in spite of their cultural differences. The aspect of family seemed to dominate with regard to information and knowledge sharing in small companies. In as much as individuals came from different cultures and backgrounds, the aspect of *family* seemed to thrive in most of these companies. Employees in these small companies view each other more as family rather than people from different culture groups. As mentioned earlier, small companies do not have the luxury to form groups based on culture, since the number of employees in the companies is small. Rather than doing this, employees would instead work harmoniously together and form good bonds with each other. Strong relationships and ties with each other is what makes information and

knowledge sharing thrive in these small companies.

As identified above, some of the reasons why employees were not willing to share, related to issues of peoples' attitudes, lack of time and human resources. These small companies worked on various projects and time was a limiting factor. With limited human resources, some employees were too caught up in their day-to-day work, thereby neglecting sharing their experiences. As mentioned earlier, in one of the companies some of the employees might be occupied with a single project and they will not have time to document what they had done. This can reduce on the idea for knowledge sharing processes and the main reason in this particular instance can be the issue of time and human resources. The employees should meet a certain deadline, while at the same time they have few people working on a particular project. Without enough resources in the form of time and people, knowledge sharing becomes a major time consuming process, which results in little or no knowledge sharing taking place. One of the directors (Company E) mentioned; "*Too little time, few people, too many projects and busy schedules*".

Employees, attitudes, and not necessarily limited to their culture, was another limiting factor to employees' willingness to share. As mentioned above, an individual might have an attitude, which makes it difficult to give him/her advice, or share information and knowledge with him/her.

5.2.4. Information and knowledge sharing and culture

This section covers '*general*' cultural aspects that might affect information and knowledge sharing in culturally diverse small companies. Issues of trust and reward systems are addressed in this section. This section also identifies formal and informal methods that these small companies use for information and knowledge sharing. Questions 4 to 8 covered this section. More specific cultural issues relating to information and knowledge sharing in small companies (such as, language and communication; cultural dimensions; educational backgrounds and race relations) are dealt with in Sections 5.2.5-5.2.8.

5.2.4.1 Question 4: Encouraging information and knowledge sharing

During the investigation this question was directed to the five senior managers of the companies that were investigated. Employees can share only so much, but a

company should make an effort to see that they establish measures that will create a knowledge sharing culture, in spite of cultural differences. Since no formal structure for information and knowledge sharing was identified in any of the companies, the companies had to come up with ways to encourage knowledge sharing in the companies, as well as create an awareness of the importance of information and knowledge sharing. The management of the companies had to assume a leading role to encourage information and knowledge sharing hence the importance of this question.

Findings

In general, companies did encourage information and knowledge sharing. One of the limiting factors, as mentioned above, might have been the issue of time and human resources. Being small companies, it might be difficult to create time for formal information and knowledge sharing activities, since there will be projects that will need to be completed. Formal channels were, therefore, limited, however, these companies did have meetings, training sessions and seminars and these were the most formal place for information and knowledge sharing. In this case, formal information and knowledge sharing implied that the companies actually set aside a time where they gathered together as employees. It was in such settings that they discussed issues such as problems faced during projects, together with solutions to such problems. Hence, knowledge was shared, and all this was recorded for future reference. Question 7 addresses more of the formal channels for knowledge sharing in these small companies. On encouraging information and knowledge sharing, one of the senior managers of Company B, who specialized in software development, stated:

This company does encourage information and knowledge sharing and it is helpful if someone were to fall sick or resign from the company. The company will not lose knowledge due to an employee's departure since knowledge sharing is ongoing in this company.

In order to achieve this, the company had daily meetings where employees shared what they were doing on a daily basis. It was at such meetings that employees would know what their colleagues were working on. One of the directors stated that since it is a small company, everyone seems to know what everyone else is doing. To improve this aspect of sharing, the company does what is called *after action review* (Section 3.2.3.3), which usually takes place in-between projects. In-between projects, (namely after a project or before a project), employees, in their respective teams,

discuss issues about a particular project and how they can improve on it to obtain better results for future projects. Employees discuss past experiences of related issues, which might improve results for a project. An example is when employees outline how they have tackled or solved a particular problem before. If anyone has to do a similar project, they do not have to re-do it from scratch, since the blueprint is already there.

Another director (Company A) stated:

we try and push them to be self-sufficient... being a small company, we do not have the time for big training courses, or manpower for that matter so they really have to push themselves and learn from each other.

Small companies may have an issue of scarce human resources, considering the amount and type of work that the company does. Employees should strive to improve themselves by seeking problems and finding solutions for them. Employees at Company A, for instance, are encouraged to be self sufficient and have a drive to seek information and knowledge. The director mentioned they did not want to spoon-feed their employees, but they rather wanted them to be their own thinkers, be able to solve problems and be creative and innovative in their work. The director mentioned that the company had an internal database where they stored all project information. This is accessible to everyone and, therefore, it can be easy to access shared information, which is relevant to the projects that they are involved with.

Analysis

From most of the director's statements above, they seemed keen on encouraging their employees to actively undertake information and knowledge sharing. With time and human resources as a limiting factor, the companies advocated for self-sufficiency, where employees had to learn from the company. With a repository in place, it becomes easy for employees to revisit the repository to share problems, which they might have incurred before.

'After action review' was another form of encouraging sharing. Employees come together at a formal place of discussion. This can be a meeting set up, brainstorming session, or a blog using the wiki. In one of the companies, they also have a blog available for discussion, where, employees simply upload a discussion topic and various people can join from their work stations and participate in the discussion. Employees who work on a project come together and present ideas on how to tackle a problem within a project. This exchange of ideas is a form of information and

knowledge sharing, and hence, knowledge transfer takes place. To further strengthen the process of information and knowledge sharing, the companies come together as a whole (namely people from different projects), and share their experiences in relation to their projects. These companies create an ongoing process of information and knowledge sharing. Problems are shared, past experiences are shared, and ideas are shared. All this is recorded mainly through the repository, wiki, databases which are accessible to all company employees. Best practices and solutions for these problems are shared and recorded. One of the companies mentioned how one person from a project team faces a problem, which they cannot solve. He stated that it is in daily stand-up meetings where they state this and more often than not, they find someone who can say that they have tackled such a problem. Once this is recorded, such a problem will no longer have to be an issue, since tacit knowledge has been shared.

With all this in mind, different cultural backgrounds become minor issues. Information and knowledge sharing will no longer be limited by culture. A project team might have four people and three of them are from different culture groups.

5.2.4.2 Question 5: How trust plays a role in information and knowledge sharing

As outlined in Section 3.4, trust can play a crucial role in information and knowledge sharing. Trust amongst each other can ensure that employees are more open with each other and that they will be able to share easily with each other. People can decide to confide their trust in others from the same culture group, or maybe someone with the same level of education as them.

Findings

One of the respondents mentioned that the giver should trust that the receiver is capable of handling the information mostly when the information is confidential. Conversely, the receiver should be able to trust the accuracy of the information that they receive. The issue of trust is definitely a factor for sharing and once people have doubt about the authenticity of information or knowledge, the quality of sharing might be negatively influenced. One of the respondents mentioned that they can rely on information when it comes from a reliable source, and in order for this to happen, employees must have good relationships with each other.

One of the directors, however, mentioned that trust was not necessarily a big issue, especially considering that his company was small. He said the following:

In his company there are no trust issues and employees are generally open to each other. With a small company it seems easier to trust each other more reducing unethical ways of obtaining and using knowledge like red tape and backstabbing...

To support this statement, this director mentioned that, in general, small companies seemed to become attached to the idea of 'family', as mentioned above. Because of the size of the company, the employees basically have good relationships; hence they call it 'family' (Section 5.2.3.2). Because of this 'family' concept employees share information and knowledge at will without having to worry about trust issues.

One of the respondents gave the following example of how trust had a negative effect on the company.

We had a definite case of that where we had the one employee who just didn't share what he was doing, and it was all his own. When he left, it took a lot of expertise from us to unravel that. Because he did everything himself, it wasn't documented or anything.

Poor management was another factor identified by one of the respondents, which can be categorized under 'trust'. If their manager did not trust them to delegate what they are doing, he would hold on to his knowledge, hence it would take time for that particular manager to complete work tasks by themselves. Instead of delegating, they do it themselves so they overburden themselves and the people under them do not have enough work to do. The senior manager of Company A mentioned that some managers have this attitude:

If I do it myself it will take me half an hour, it's going to take me 10 minutes to explain it to somebody else and they are going to take 3 hours to do it, so I might as well do it myself.

In this case knowledge is not shared at all because the manager has trust issues. This is trust in the sense that the superior manager does not have enough confidence to delegate duties to subordinates. The senior managers should share their knowledge with their subordinates, and the way to do this is to train or mentor them. Trust levels will have increased and subordinates will have acquired more knowledge through this process of sharing. If this manager were to leave, the

company would have serious problems to replicate his/her work.

Analysis

Small companies seem to rely on the low numbers of employees to build good relationships, which in turn increases the level of trust within the company. The aspect of 'family' was discussed above, and it seems that companies have their own culture as a unit, rather than individuals from different culture groups.

When employees do not trust each other, they do not share as shown in the response from one of the directors above. It seemed not to be a culture issue that an individual refused or was not willing to share. As a result, the company struggled to document the work of this particular person.

Poor management was another trust issue highlighted by one of the respondents (Company B). When managers do not trust their subordinates, knowledge is not always shared, which is not beneficial to the company. If senior managers do not delegate, they retain experience for themselves. If a senior manager does not trust their juniors' capability to do a particular job, then there will be no point in sharing. Information and knowledge sharing involves training, mentoring, seminars, coaching, brainstorming, and tackling problems together, and by so doing knowledge transfer takes place. The senior manager can eventually confide in their juniors, while they take on other roles that might require their expertise. By sharing knowledge with their subordinates, managers can improve trust levels, thus increasing knowledge sharing in a company. This retains knowledge within the company, which further increases the intellectual capital of the company as a whole.

5.2.4.3 Question 6: A reward system to encourage information and knowledge sharing

Rewards are sometimes used as a means to encourage employees to share information and knowledge with their colleagues. A reward system might encourage employees to be more engaged in sharing.

Findings

One of the respondents mentioned that it is types of rewards that may create problems and how one measures what category is more rewarding than another, mostly when all employees participate in sharing. First preference must be given to

encourage employees to share without a reward. Measuring a financial reward system against knowledge sharing may not be easy. To further support this, one of the directors mentioned how incentivizing peoples' efforts, is not necessarily the way forward. In as much as rewards might work to encourage people to share, the company should rather create a culture where employees will share more freely, regardless of the different cultures or their need to obtain incentives to share information and knowledge. He stated:

Every employee at the company knew what they were here for and that is enough motivation to allow them not to hold on to knowledge and share.

Hence, incentivizing information and knowledge sharing might not be as effective as seen from these respondents.

On the contrary, some respondents found reward systems as a motivating factor for information and knowledge sharing. One of the respondents (Company D) emphasized a need to monitor such a system all the time. He also mentioned how a good word of appreciation helps. He mentioned the danger that employees might end up sharing for the wrong reasons. Employees might share because they want the reward. Removing the reward might mean not sharing. In this case a knowledge sharing culture is necessary since employees will know the value of information and knowledge sharing. Another respondent who was the director of Company C mentioned that the company incentivizes their employees for their knowledge sharing efforts by having monthly staff development sessions.

We have staff development sessions every month; we make it a lunch as well. So if we were doing a staff development session we had to bring stuff to eat or stuff to make it nice. So we try to incentivize it in that way but like I said time is an issue. We get a lot of learning from these sessions... We also encourage people to apply for travel rewards and to conferences... we encourage people to go and if there are any seminars... we will go. We share, especially when someone is working on a particular project and there's something interesting, then we will encourage them to go. They have to come back and share with us about it. So we do that in the staff session, they only feedback for like half an hour...

Such an incentive is not necessarily tangible in nature, but it increases an individual's intellectual capital.

Analysis

The respondents had various opinions with regard to rewards as a motivation to

employees for information and knowledge sharing. To some, creating a knowledge sharing culture was the way forward rather than creating rewards. If employees know what they need to do in a company, they should be able to do it without looking forward to a reward. One of the companies (Company B) testified that their company developed a knowledge sharing culture. A reward might be given, but it will not be the drive that enables employees to share, but rather a knowledge sharing culture does. Because of the culture in the organization, employees share because they have the culture aspect instilled in them.

Conversely, some of the respondents saw rewards as a way to motivate sharing. An employee can hold on to knowledge because they might feel that they are not getting enough rewards. They might feel less appreciated if they do not receive positive feedback from their senior managers. To them, they share, and then they are rewarded for this sharing. Such employees should stay motivated or else they will not share. These rewards can be financial or by word-of-appreciation. Once an employee feels that they are appreciated, they might then find it easier to share their knowledge.

5.2.4.4 Question 7 & 8: Approaches for information and knowledge sharing

This question was aimed at establishing if the companies had a formal approach to their information and knowledge sharing activities. As outlined above in the first section (Question 1), various approaches for information and knowledge sharing were identified. Various forms of knowledge sharing techniques were identified in Section 3.2.3.3 and in this section this researcher wanted to identify if these techniques were being fully used in practice. Formal channels would also show how the company values the intellectual property in the company, as well as the circulation of this information and knowledge. All of these companies did not have departments that dealt with information and knowledge sharing, since they are small companies. As a result of this, they did not have defined policies, strategies or structures for information and knowledge sharing. This did not imply the in-existence of information and knowledge sharing. When asked the question on information and knowledge, most of the directors identified different approaches, which they used for information and knowledge sharing within their companies.

Findings

The following are some of the approaches employed by the companies where the

respondents were employed. Various approaches were established and some of these were universal in all the companies, while others were unique to a particular company.

a. Meetings

All respondents mentioned the idea of regular meetings as a platform for information and knowledge sharing. Tacit knowledge sharing is particularly not easy to share and one way to share is storytelling. The trend in all the companies seemed that most of them would have regular meetings (daily, weekly or monthly), where they would actively share their work experiences. With regard to the meetings one of the respondents mentioned:

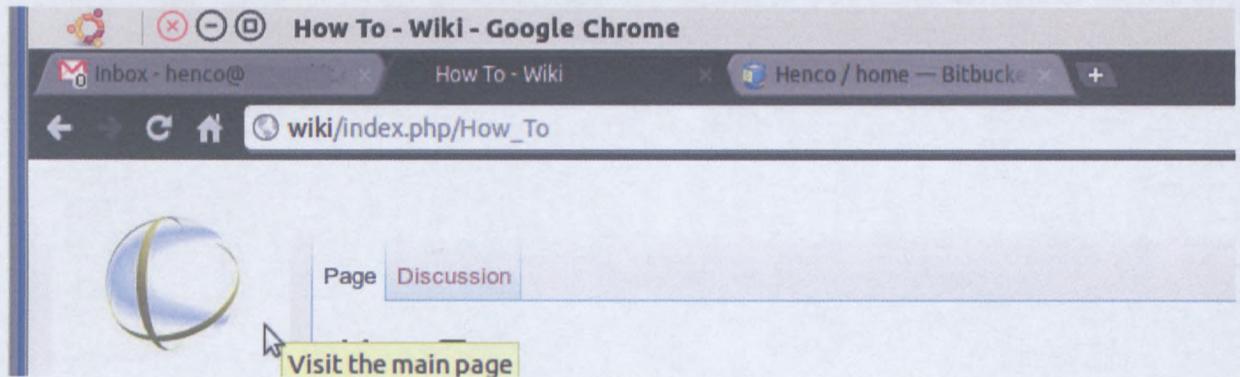
...so we'll have our daily stand up meetings where everybody just has a few minutes to reflect on what they did yesterday, what they are going to do today and if there's any concerns or red flags which they will then raise up in the stand up meeting. So that way, everybody in the office knows what one particular developer will be working on... And that will obviously get documented on the wiki...

Another formal channel used by one of these companies was *after action review*, where members who worked on a particular project came together following the completion of a project for discussion purpose. They discussed the projects, challenges they faced, and possible ways of doing a similar project in future. Employees shared their experiences by giving brief statements about their work experiences. This can be in the form of storytelling, although none of the respondents defined it in that way.

b. Electronic media

These include company e-mails, which the employees must keep logged on once they get to work. Most of the companies had personalized e-mail services while others used services such as MS Outlook. The e-mails are linked to various information and knowledge sharing resources, which make it easier to communicate information or knowledge between the different interfaces. Figure 5.1 shows how the e-mail is linked to the company's wiki, as well as the repository. The use of electronic media was another form of knowledge sharing that was identified by most respondents. They mentioned the use of e-mails as a platform to share.

Figure 5.1: Company B e-mail service linked to the wiki and the repository



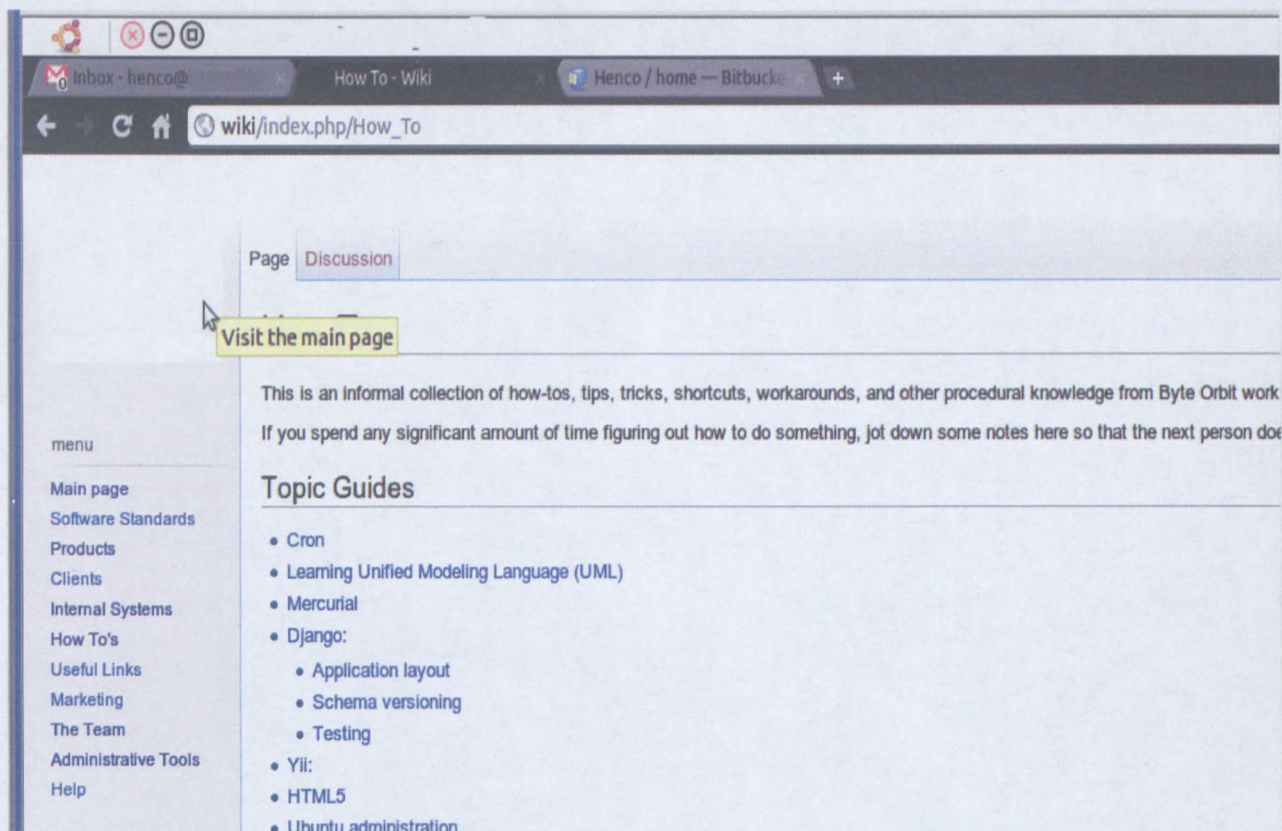
c. Wikis

One of the directors mentioned how the wiki was used by employees to share their work experiences. This wiki is available to everyone in the company and employees learn from each other's experiences. An example of a wiki from Company B is shown in the screenshot below. One of the comments on the screenshot states:

This is an informal collection of how-to's, tips, shortcuts, workarounds and other procedural knowledge from Company B work. If you spend a significant amount of time figuring how to do something, jot down some notes here so that the next person doesn't have to.

An employee can post problems experienced, solutions, best practices, and ideas. It is a platform for sharing knowledge and learning. As seen on the screenshot, the employees' email is linked to the wiki page, as well as the repository page. Individuals upload their work experiences (namely problems or encounters faced together with solutions) onto the wiki, which is accessible to all employees. Once an individual posts a note on the wiki, it is visible to other employees and they can easily edit it. By editing, they can also add their comments to the same topics or even suggest ideas or better methods to solve a particular problem. Hence knowledge sharing will have taken place. If a similar problem is faced by another employee, they do not have to do it from scratch, as they simply visit the wiki. Figure 5.2 shows an illustration of a wiki taken from one of the companies that were investigated.

Figure 5.2: Screenshot of (Company B) wiki for information and knowledge sharing



d. Repository

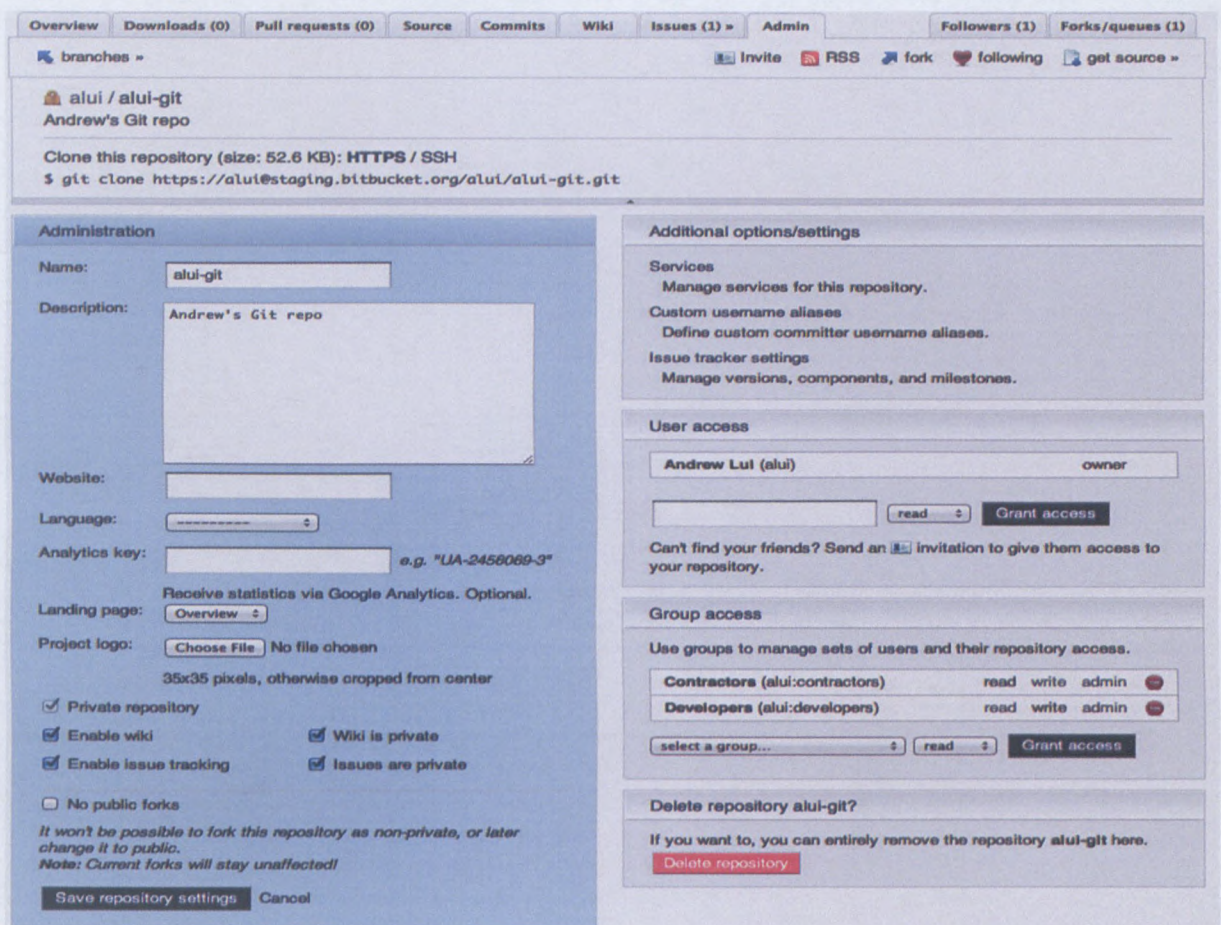
File storage facilities were also mentioned by some of the companies. In this case, companies mentioned servers, repositories, resource centers, and digital libraries in the sharing of explicit knowledge. In one of the companies the system continuously updates, so if someone were to change a program, it goes into the central repository of all the company's programs. If an individual works on a particular project and they face problems, all of their work is recorded and continuously updated. One respondent (software developer in Company A) mentioned the following:

Every time we change a program we put a note in it, so... every day, every time that this program has changed, there is a date, who did it, a version number, a particular customer description straight away.... In our normal day to day work, we are continuously updating, and when we do our change control, if I might change some programs, it goes straight into the central repository of all our programs...if somebody is to have a problem they can look into the last few changes that went into the log...

This program, therefore, keeps track of all changes, updates, problems, and solutions so everyone is basically monitored. The director mentioned that this

enables employees to communicate with each other, thus making the company quite efficient. All the work and changes that an employee engages with are saved on the repository for future references. Problems incurred and solutions to these problems are also immediately recorded. Figure 5.3 shows the home site of one of this company's repositories. However, not much detail could be shown here because of company restrictions. The repository in this company shows how employees can upload their work, together with problems and solutions for different projects. This repository, as mentioned before, is linked to their wiki and e-mail system, therefore, it simplifies sharing.

Figure 5.3: Repository screen-shot from Company B



e. Training sessions

These included activities such as coaching sessions, mentoring, workshops and seminars. One of the company directors mentioned:

We have staff development sessions a number of times per year, and it is at these sessions that employees have a real platform to do knowledge sharing with their colleagues.

Training can be in the form of mentoring or coaching programmes, where senior employees can impart their past experiences to the junior and less experienced employees at the company. One of the company directors (Company C) particularly mentioned this as an advantage, since it is more practical and that employees would gain experience through action or practical learning. The director mentioned that when they engage with software development projects, a senior employee will team up with a junior employee and work on a project together.

f. Open plan office

Some of the companies that were visited had open-plan office setups. The ones with an open plan office mentioned how employees, especially those in the same teams, have easy access to one another. They can have chats, share ideas, or brainstorm easily. Project teams are clustered in one area so that it becomes easy to have meetings where they can discuss issues pertaining to current projects. Problems incurred are easily solved and the knowledge exchange is more tacit, which makes it more difficult to capture and record. Most of the sharing takes place by word-of-mouth.

g. Social networks

The possibility of using social networks for sharing was investigated by this researcher. One particular platform identified here was Facebook. Most of the respondents mentioned their awareness of social networks. However, not all were in agreement that social networks can be used as a viable tool for information and knowledge sharing. One of the directors in one of the companies mentioned how he was against the use of social networks such as Facebook in the workplace.

I think social networks reduce production. At one stage I was tossing with the idea of barring Facebook from the people's computers during the day because I believe it definitely is a drain of production.

Another had a different approach to the social network issue. *"This company does not really restrict people from using social networks so everyone in the company has access to that especially Facebook. People are free to use their Facebook especially if it does not counter production"*. However, for business related issues, the company has particular web services specifically for this. The company's intranet in this case is the main platform for sharing business related information.

Table 5.2 below summarizes the various tools (from all companies), both formal and

informal, which these companies used for information and knowledge sharing. The table also highlights any form of storage facility that allows employees to easily access information and knowledge.

Table 5.2: Summary of approaches regarding information and knowledge sharing

| Formal information and knowledge sharing | Informal information and knowledge sharing | Information and knowledge storage facility |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training sessions, coaching sessions, mentoring, workshops, seminars • Electronic resources, e-mails, chats, • Meetings, after-action review, storytelling, • Wikis • Web based serves (e-mails) • Special software package • Face-to-face networks (video conferences) • Open-plan office setup | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • Lunch break chats • Afternoon chats | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Database • Internal storage facility • Repository • Wiki • Internal resource centre (on server) |

Analysis

As discussed extensively before, tacit knowledge is difficult to record and store, since it is intangible in nature. One way to share tacit knowledge is by storytelling where individuals share their experiences with each other. As identified in the findings and other previous sections, one of the ways in which companies share tacit knowledge is when they have meetings. Tacit knowledge is most likely to be affected more by the issue of different cultural backgrounds, and this is in comparison to explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge sharing involves conveying speech. This means that individuals should express themselves more to solve a problem or to share knowledge. When sharing tacit knowledge, there is dialogue and mutual exchange of explicit and tacit knowledge. One of the companies mentioned how they have daily stand-up meetings. Another company mentioned how they have weekly meetings and/or monthly meetings. Individuals present their projects and share what they are working on in these projects. To enhance tacit knowledge exchange or sharing, individual staff members are stimulated to highlight challenges or problems that they face during their projects. When tacit knowledge is shared, it is recorded and one of the tools used for recording knowledge was the wiki. On a daily basis, the staff faces challenges and problems in their different teams. It is in solving these problems that tacit knowledge is shared. One of the directors mentioned that when teams face a

problem or challenge, they either upload it on the wiki or repository. Once it is there, it becomes shared knowledge. When a similar problem is faced by a different team, because of the tacit knowledge shared, it becomes easier and quicker to revisit the wiki, repository, or whatever storage facility was used as means to solve the problem. This also applies to regular meetings that these companies have. Project teams and individuals discuss problems, or situations that they face in their projects, and reach solutions based on other project teams' or individuals' past experiences, hence tacit knowledge sharing.

Training sessions and mentoring was another form through which knowledge was exchanged in these companies. In as far as mentoring is concerned, the companies would have the more experienced employees share their knowledge, experiences and ideas with less experienced employees. In small companies, project teams are not as large, hence it became easier for a less experienced employee to approach a more experienced employee when a problem or situation arose. Because of the size of these companies, and the family aspect, it became easier for the less experienced employees to approach the more experienced employee because there is a low power distance (power distance is discussed in Section 5.2.6). Generally, employees were not afraid to approach their superiors.

The open plan office arrangement also allowed for tacit knowledge exchange to happen more easily. The different teams, for instance in Company C, sat in close proximity to one another. In the event that they wanted to brainstorm or have discussions, it was easy to do so because of this close proximity.

Because of the nature of tacit knowledge, most of the companies had more facilities in place to share explicit knowledge. Most of the companies had facilities to store their information, which were accessible for everyone in the company. These included repositories, digital libraries, information stored on the server, the use of wikis, and e-mail. These acted as distribution centers and ensured that best practices were achieved by doing things, or working out problems over and over again. For example, the repository is like an information and knowledge hub where everything that employees work on is kept. Employees can then easily upload and retrieve from these hubs which act like resource centers.

The use of a wiki was another way to store and share information and knowledge. Employees uploaded their work experience, for example, problems faced during a

project and how they were solved. On a wiki it is also easy to share knowledge where employees can upload information, which can be added and/or edited by other employees. Employees can have discussion sessions via the wiki. A problem could be posted on the wiki and other employees can easily access solutions, which are made visible to everyone. As seen in Figure 5.1, the company's wiki is kept open and linked to the e-mails and repositories which makes it easy to track down certain problems. The wiki can also act as a virtual meeting point where problems are raised or presented and individuals can have discussions. Once this has been stored, an individual who faces problems can easily consult the wiki.

5.2.5 Question 9: Language and communication

Language is one of the cultural aspects that may be a limiting factor for information and knowledge sharing in culturally diverse small companies (Section 3.4.2.1). This section aimed to address the issue of language as investigated in the small companies that were investigated by this researcher. In the South African context, the language used in the business world is English. However, there are many languages in South Africa so English is not a first language for the majority of South Africans (Section 1.4.3.3). English is, therefore, an acquired, second language for many South Africans. Expressing oneself in a second language might not be easy, hence this section intended to investigate if any of these respondents faced any language problems. In general, not one company had employees who represented all South African culture groups. In spite of this, the companies had a diverse workforce. Culture groups that were employed by the companies' included White (Afrikaans, English), Indian, Coloured, Xhosa and Shona persons.

Findings

One of the respondents, namely a senior manager (Company D), mentioned how English sometimes can be a hindrance to information and knowledge sharing. He stated:

I am experiencing it sometimes myself since Afrikaans is my home language and English is a second language. Obviously through the years my English has improved quite a lot.

He further mentioned how he found it much easier to communicate when he deals with Afrikaans-speaking colleagues. When a group of Afrikaans-speaking employees meet, they tend to speak in Afrikaans, since it is easier to express themselves.

However, this does not mean that their English was poor. Another respondent supported this statement by stating the following:

Communication in your own mother tongue is the best, it is unfortunate that English has the business edge in most countries and that makes it impossible in most African countries.

Some of the respondents highlighted the fact that it is easier to speak and communicate by using their first language. This is evident when people of the same language meet. They easily switch to their language as a form of communication. One of the company directors (Company C) mentioned how the employees were quite 'ethical' about language issues so they would easily switch languages to accommodate people from other cultures.

One of the respondents (Company A) mentioned how they faced language problems when dealing with customers. He mentioned as a typical example that when dealing with a few customers, they face problems in areas such as the Eastern Cape Province where their use of English was not good. He mentioned how in such cases they would find a language translator to assist.

Another respondent (Company D) mentioned that they did not have language problems. He mentioned how employees were comfortable with speaking in English. With a lot of the respondents being bi-lingual, one of the directors stated:

Employees here are very much bi-lingual and our work is all done in English so most of the people are really comfortable expressing themselves in English. You have to be because we work in English. When we do need to do work in other languages, we have people who like do field work in other languages, and translations... In this company English language is not a hindrance to communication....

Analysis

Language as a barrier to sharing does exist. Generally in South Africa, people who have attained a certain level of education have a good understanding of English. Most education, especially in tertiary institutions, is mainly undertaken in English, therefore, to get a qualification, one cannot escape using English as a mode of communication. Fluency levels might differ, but most of the respondents in these companies speak English well. Most of the people who were interviewed for this research attained at least a tertiary level education qualification, therefore, in terms of basic communication in English; this was not seen as a problem. In as much as

some employees found it easier to express themselves in their home languages, this did not limit their ability or proficiency in English.

The above responses show that employees seem comfortable conducting their day-to-day business in their first language. However, because of the diversity, employees are also comfortable to conduct business in English, especially when the team(s) is comprised of individuals from various cultures. Since these are small companies, a team can comprise as few as four team members only, and these will have different home languages. Because of the fluency of most of the respondents, employees generally did not have a major problem switching languages. When people from the same language group speak to each other, they prefer to speak in their own language. This, however, does not imply their inability to conduct fluent conversations in English.

A trend that was identified is that individuals would rather speak in their home language, since it is easier to do so. As noticed in Company B, when a group of Afrikaans-speaking people come together, they speak in Afrikaans, and not English. Even when they are placed in a team to work on a project together, they would rather speak in Afrikaans, or the language of that particular group, whether it is Xhosa, English or any other language. Therefore, sharing of knowledge, especially tacit, might be easier if conducted in a mother language. This is simply because individuals might find it easier to express themselves in their own language rather than in a second language.

However, as mentioned earlier, a preferred choice of the home language rather than English does not mean an inability to speak or express themselves in English. Generally, people in South Africa are at least bilingual. Fluency levels might vary, but since most education is conducted in English, a lot of educated people have a basic understanding of English. As found in all of the five companies, employees have a certain level of appreciation of the English language. As found during the interviews, when four people are in a team and they are from different language groups, they proceed and conduct their business in English, since English is generally accepted as the main business language. Language is, therefore, not a major limitation to information and knowledge sharing in these diverse small companies. However, employees would, if they can, prefer knowledge sharing (especially tacit knowledge) in their home language.

5.2.6 Cultural dimensions

The aim of this section was to investigate how different elements of culture, as discussed in Sections 2.3 and 3.4, affected the way people from different cultures participated in information and knowledge sharing. Cultural dimensions are a definition of cultural traits based on backgrounds, and these affect the way that people share information and knowledge.

5.2.6.1 Question 10: If employees find it easy to approach their superiors

The aim of this question was to gauge the 'power distance' between employees and their managers. Section 2.3.4 defines power distance as the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This is a cultural trait that might affect the way that employees conduct information and knowledge sharing. A larger power distance would mean that employees might find it harder to approach their superiors. A smaller power distance would mean that employees have no problem approaching their superiors.

Findings

One of the companies (Company C) had a situation where one talented junior employee was quite withdrawn and did not fit in with the team. This employee found it difficult to fit into the new and different cultures and to approach other employees. He worked as an individual in spite of efforts from other employees to incorporate him in their activities. Therefore, it is not always merely about an individual's intellectual ability, but also about their attitude. This employee did not only find it difficult to approach his superiors, but he also had difficulties interacting with other employees. This is a typical example of someone with a high power distance. When dealing with someone with a high power distance, sharing can be minimal, or at least more formal.

Apart from this example, most respondents generally found it easy to approach their superiors. Some of them continually referred to the example that in a small company they are like family, hence everyone in the company, including senior managers, is approachable. One of the directors (Company C) motivated as follows:

I am pretty approachable. I think I am quite busy so they (employees) know

they can't just ask me things whenever they feel like so it's more of a case... I will get back to them because I am in meetings a lot through the day so I am not always immediately available but I will always make the time if it needs to and we have an office day (meetings) on a Monday so we all are in the office, that's the idea. So Monday is the day, unless it's something urgent, then other than that there are two managers behind me who are on the front-line, who will take issues, queries etc and they are quite approachable as well. If it's something urgent, then they will get a hold of me and say this is urgent; you need to deal with it...

It is relatively easy in a small company for people to build really strong bonds, which allow them to be fairly approachable.

Analysis

As seen in Section 2.3.4, power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of the organization and institutions accept that power is distributed equally. This is how someone who has less power sees someone who has more power as an authoritative figure. This ultimately defines how they approach this person or how they relate to them. According to the extensive research done by Hofstede (1980), South Africa scores 49 on this dimension, which means that people, to a larger extent, accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and, which needs no further justification. Hierarchy in an organization is seen as reflecting inherent inequalities; centralization is popular; subordinates expect to be told what to do; and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat.

Hofstede's cultural dimension on power distance might be more applicable in larger companies. From the companies investigated for this research, it seems that there is a low power distance, which means that people with low power distance find it easy to approach people with high power. In this case, knowledge sharing is a more natural process, as mentioned earlier, and this could be attributed to the aspect of family. An authoritarian rule in such a small setting might not be the way forward to encourage sharing. Hence, generally, in the small companies that were investigated, power distance is low; therefore, employees find it easier to approach their superiors.

5.2.6.2 Question 11: If employees find it embarrassing to ask for information from colleagues

This question was mainly directed at managers and/or the owners of the company. The aim of the question was to find out if the managers might feel that they cannot ask for information and knowledge from their subordinates and juniors. In some

cases, managers might have problems approaching their juniors if they encounter a work-related problem. The higher the power distance, the more difficult it becomes to approach a junior employee. Therefore, this question identified if managers had a low or high power distance.

Findings

One director (Company A) has had the company since 1971 and he felt that he always knew more than anybody else in as far as the company's work was concerned. This company specialized in software development. However, he mentioned that he did not seek help from juniors and subordinates. He stated that he specifically approached the juniors with technology-related questions because they were more up-to-date and knew more, but he would never ask them how their software works. In this case, no sharing occurred from junior to senior. He believed that where software was concerned, he did not need to seek information or knowledge from junior employees. He stated:

I used to, up until a few years ago I would never have to ask anybody, I always knew more than anybody. As far as our software is concerned that's still the case, but technology I have to use the youngsters, because they are more up to date with technology, it doesn't worry me seeking information and knowledge from them. So I just ask them. To me that's what I pay them for. But I would never ask them how our software works.

Still on this topic, another senior manager (Company B) mentioned how company seniors did not struggle to approach juniors for knowledge sharing purposes. He stated:

I've come from a few other companies as well where in the office there was a lot of politics so the senior person would never ask information from their junior.

He further mentioned that there has been a number of occasions where seniors actually learn from juniors, and this is beneficial to the company and employees, especially where knowledge sharing is concerned. In this company seniors were generally open to obtaining information and knowledge from junior staff members.

Another respondent (Company C) mentioned how it was not a problem to ask younger employees for assistance, especially when it comes to information about projects that they worked on.

If they are busy setting up or arranging things and I do not know, I have to ask them how to do it. I have no problem asking and they have no problem sharing.

Analysis

The general trend in these small companies was that senior people did not have problems learning or acquiring knowledge from junior employees. There were a few exceptions, as illustrated above, where the director believed that he knew everything as far as his field was concerned. Superiors, who find it difficult to share information and knowledge, especially if they are on the receiving side, have a high power distance.

Like their employees, most senior managers and owners of these small companies did have a low power distance. This could be largely as a result of the organizational culture in these small companies. They exercised a participative leadership style, and did not have a problem getting involved with junior employees, probably because of the nature and size of the companies. Also, the small companies had developed an organizational culture whereby sharing information and knowledge was not an issue in terms of whether a senior learns from a junior, or vice versa. One of the senior members of the one company did mention how in the past they came from a company where learning, or acquiring information and knowledge from a junior was not frequent. This is a typical case of high power distance.

5.2.6.3 Question 12: If employees hold on to knowledge to gain a competitive edge

This question was aimed at identifying whether employees had a competitiveness issue where they would work with only themselves in mind. The cultural dimension of 'masculinity' is covered in this question. Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity refers to the distribution of roles amongst genders, which is another fundamental issue for any society where a range of solutions are found (Section 2.3.4). In a masculinity culture, there is more assertiveness and sympathy for the strong. This is a highly competitive environment. In a femininity culture, there is a lot of cooperation and sympathy for the weak. Employees work together.

Furthermore, this question wanted to investigate if people were more comfortable working as an individual rather than as a team. The cultural dimension of 'individualism and collectivism' was also covered in this question. Individualism on

the one side versus its opposite, collectivism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups (Section 2.3.4).

Findings

One director (Company A) emphasized that their employees did not have the comfort to betray each other to gain competitive advantage. Employees at this company have good relationships with each other so they would not necessarily betray or deceive other employees merely to make a point. The culture in this company is more of a collective team unit rather than an individualistic, highly competitive unit. In a collective culture, team members, or individuals in a company tend to work more together as a team and, as a result, sharing amongst each other is usually not a big issue.

Another respondent also agreed with the fact that employees tend to share information and knowledge without the aspect of holding onto whatever knowledge they have. Employees openly share with each other and there are no problems with information and knowledge hoarding at all. With knowledge hoarding, employees tend to hold on to knowledge for various reasons, and one reason can be for competitive advantage. Instead of sharing their knowledge, an individual can use their knowledge for leverage in the company. One of the directors (Company C) mentioned the following:

Everyone is encouraged to excel here and for the company to excel. You do not have to step on anybody else to do well. That's definitely out of our culture.

Culture, in this instance, implied that the company did have an information and knowledge sharing approach whereby sharing occurred freely. The employee's attitude was of information and knowledge sharing as opposed to sharing for personal gains or advantage. Employees in this company displayed a collectivist culture (Section 3.4.1.3.1).

On the contrary, one of the respondents mentioned how time and a lack of human resources might result in individuals holding on to their knowledge. In this company, some employees are open to sharing, whereas other employees need to be approached for them to open up and share information and knowledge. Employees might not share because they believe that they will be caught up in their daily work activities. Because of the pressure of being a small company, employees might be

working on projects and they find less time to get themselves involved more. The only way to get them to share would be to ask them for help, as one of the respondents stated:

Some people are more open towards sharing and actually enjoy doing documentation whereas you get your people that do not enjoy that so they will write up something on the wiki but it will be like summarized basically, not explaining clearly but at least you know they have got the knowledge. If you have a question about it you can ask them.

Analysis

The general trend amongst the companies that were investigated is that they tend to appreciate femininity more than masculinity. They tend to appreciate working together (co-operation) rather than working against each other (competition), as seen in Section 3.4.1.3.3 and in Section 2.3.4. This can also be attributed to the aspect of family. These small companies have individuals from different culture groups, therefore, they have to work with what they have hence, as mentioned in the findings, they do not have the luxury to hoard knowledge and hold information against each other. Rather, they have to work as a team, hence the femininity cultural concept (Section 3.4.1.3.3). However, the aspect of masculinity is important to ensure that employees strive and excel. Employees must be competitive and aggressive to improve themselves rather than to hold back knowledge for personal reasons.

A high score (masculine) on this dimension indicates that the society is defined by competition, achievement and success, with success being defined by the winner / best in field – a value system that starts in school and continues throughout organizational behaviour. A low score (feminine) on the dimension means that the dominant values in society include caring for others and quality of life (Section 3.4.1.3.3). With the aspect of family being prevalent in the small companies, it seems that the femininity dimension identifies with the small companies. Employees are not out there to compete so much against each other, but would rather work together as a team. The director of Company B mentioned that *“the company is as effective as the least productive member of the team”*. In order to achieve and excel as a unit, employees should make an effort to work together and be more team-oriented rather than been individualistic.

Since the companies that were investigated have a more femininity cultural approach, this leads to the aspect of collectivism, hence, employees appreciate the value of

working as a team rather than as an individual. Once again, because of the lack of human resources, employees in small companies must value team effort rather than work as individuals. Therefore, most of the small companies that were investigated as seen in the findings seem to portray a more collective culture.

5.2.7 Question 13: Educational background

As outlined in the previous chapters (Sections 3.4.2.2), educational background might have an influence on how people perceive information and knowledge sharing. The aim of this question was to investigate how different educational backgrounds affect information and knowledge sharing.

Findings

One of the respondents mentioned the following:

What we find is that you find different higher education institutions produce different kinds of thinking, like I went to UCT and there is a particular way people get taught...Therefore I find that people who have a similar training are easy to pick up and they have got a similar base of knowledge, they come from a similar base of knowledge.

As seen from above, different education institutions produce different ways of thinking, which in turn produces different ways of how people share with colleagues. This might be because some institutions encourage working in teams, while others encourage striving as an individual, which subsequently affects the way individuals conduct sharing.

In general, respondents did not regard education as a limiting factor to knowledge sharing. One of the respondents mentioned that education probably plays a role in information and knowledge sharing. He stated the following:

I think you should probably say yes because people who went to a good school are more likely to have gone on to do a degree, and they definitely are a better calibre than people who did not go on to do a degree.

He mentioned how educational background would definitely affect an individual on academic prowess. Another respondent further stated that educational background does not affect sharing, but rather the individual's behaviour and attitude towards fitting into a new environment. Educational background was not seen as a major

limitation to information and knowledge sharing. Most of the respondents agreed that even though they had different educational backgrounds, they all had the same level of qualification, hence as far as work-related issues were concerned, they could relate to each other.

5.2.8 Question 14: Race relations

The aim of this section was to find out if employees in small companies socialized across their different races. The 2009 research survey (South Africa.info), which was done by South African Reconciliation reveals that about one in four South Africans indicated that they never speak to other races "on a typical day during the week, whether at work or otherwise (Section 3.4.2.6). This section gives an indication of whether employees in these small companies do in fact work towards reducing the gap between the different races by engaging in social activities. Social events encourage people from different culture groups to interact, which breaks cultural differences that might hinder information and knowledge sharing.

Findings

In one of the companies (Company B) the director mentioned that the company does have people from different culture groups. This company comprises Blacks, Whites, Indian and a Black Zimbabwean. The company is strong on encouraging social ties between employees by having regular social meetings. They have social events every Friday after work. One of the senior managers in Company B mentioned:

Every Friday afternoon at about say half an hour before its time to go home we'll make sure that your work's done half an hour before you go we'll take a break and we'll have a chat in the one office here, the bigger office or stand on the balcony, we'll have a drink so we do socialize. Once in a while we'll have a company social, we don't just have the once a year end of year function, we'll have a company social were we will go out we'll socialize and we try to switch off from work completely.

Other respondents mentioned how they attend social gatherings with their colleagues outside working hours such as weddings or social functions. Another respondent mentioned that being in a small company, they do not have the luxury to be selective in terms of race, since there are few people. In some instances, the few people are divided into teams and individuals are required to interact amongst different races.

Analysis

The concept of family was once again applied to this question. As mentioned earlier, these companies are small and employ an average of twenty employees (Section 4.4.4). Socialization, according to race, can turn out to have a negative effect on the company. As mentioned in Section 5.2.6.3, these small companies do not have the luxury to form small social circles and groups (based on culture), which in the process, often excludes other employees. In general, the companies aim to involve every employee in all social activities. Social activities build bridges across cultures. For knowledge sharing to be effective, company members should build bonds among themselves and these, in turn, allow for easy information and knowledge sharing within the company. Trust levels increase, power distances decrease, and individualism decreases, whilst collectivism increases. All these are strong points to enhance information and knowledge sharing. As long as the social ties within the company flourish, disregarding cultural differences, information and knowledge sharing is bound to improve. This will ultimately cultivate for an information and knowledge sharing culture, which is essentially the main goal to overcome sharing barriers, which can be created as a result of cultural differences.

5.3 Summary of findings

The following section summarizes the findings from the different sections of the chapter.

5.3.1 Information and knowledge sharing

This section was aimed at identifying whether small companies in South Africa had an awareness of information and knowledge sharing and its importance. This section sought to identify whether these small companies were actively creating measures to participate or incorporate information and knowledge sharing in their day-to-day running of the company. Although most of the companies did not identify it as information and knowledge sharing, they seemed to have measures in place that allowed information and knowledge sharing to take place. Section 3.2.3.3 identified some factors why information and knowledge sharing is important. The small companies identified some of these factors such as creating competitive advantage, learning and retaining knowledge within the company.

The companies that were investigated, therefore, seemed to have an understanding and appreciation of information and knowledge sharing. However, no clear policies or measures were established to identify sharing or management of knowledge. Of the five companies that were investigated, none of them had a clearly defined knowledge management or sharing policy. None of them had a written strategy of their aims or goals in as far as managing knowledge was concerned. In spite of this, the senior managers informally created company-wide awareness of the benefits and need for information and knowledge sharing. One aspect that enhanced information and knowledge sharing was that company employees regarded each other as family. Respondents seemed to agree with the fact that they regarded each other as family, in spite of their cultural differences. This enhanced information and knowledge sharing, since individuals were not limited by cultural differences in the event of sharing.

Some of the limiting factors identified in this section included a lack of resources and time. Because of the size of these companies, they did not have enough human resources to dedicate to the advancement of information and knowledge sharing and management. Another limitation was individuals' attitudes towards information and knowledge sharing. Section 2.2.2.3 identifies that culture has an influence on behaviour, attitudes and values. Some of the senior managers mentioned that some employees had a negative attitude towards information and knowledge sharing.

5.3.2 Information and knowledge sharing and culture

One of the issues investigated in this section dealt with whether companies encouraged their employees to share information and knowledge. The senior managers should take a leading role in encouraging information and knowledge sharing. This creates an environment where information and knowledge sharing among employees becomes more natural and comes without much effort. For this to happen, factors such as trust and rewards systems might influence such behaviour. Also, to measure how much effort the senior managers' place on encouraging sharing, the techniques that they use for sharing were considered.

Section 3.2.3.4 mentions that for knowledge sharing to become a reality, one should create a climate of trust in the organization. Trust is important, since employees do not hold on to knowledge and hoard knowledge for personal reasons. In general, because of the aspect of family, employees in these small companies did not have

trust issues and they were willing to share. A few cases where trust was an issue were identified and some of these were a result of poor management and distrust in subordinates.

Another issue was rewards. Some people come from cultures where they need some form of reward to feel appreciated and be motivated. Section 3.2.3.2 presents the aspect of job satisfaction and motivation. If an employee does not have job satisfaction, they might not have the motivation to share knowledge. Knowledge sharing has been linked to job satisfaction and motivation. Some respondents identified rewards as a motivation to share. They mentioned that once an employee feels appreciated, sharing will only come naturally. Conversely, some respondents felt that knowledge sharing should come naturally since the company has a knowledge sharing culture. They mentioned that rewards should not be the main drive that employees share, but rather that creating a knowledge sharing culture is more effective.

Different forms of information and knowledge sharing were also considered in this section. Small companies had various techniques in place. Section 3.2.3.3 identified sharing techniques such as meetings, electronic communication, formal reports, interpersonal interaction, forums, conferences, workshops, seminars, peer assist and after-action review. The respondents for this research seemed to make use of most of this information and knowledge sharing tools. In Section 3.2.3.3 Peltokorpi (2006:139) emphasizes how knowledge is shared through interpersonal interaction. This form of interaction, according to Peltokorpi (2006) and Nonaka (1994), is the most effective way to share tacit knowledge because it conveys both verbal and non-verbal meaning (through body language, eye contact, and facial expressions). Most of the companies identified most of the techniques used in literature as a form of information and knowledge sharing. The main techniques that were used included meetings, electronic media, wikis, repositories, training sessions, and social networks. All the methods allowed for the exchange of both tacit and explicit knowledge.

5.3.3 Language and communication

The investigated companies employ employees who come from various language groups, and hence they had different home languages. In as much as they all spoke English, expression was seen as a cultural limitation in this research. As identified in

Section 3.4.1.1, knowledge sharing can be limited by poor expression of a language. Also identified in Section 2.2.2.6, culture has an influence on the way that people communicate. Furthermore, culture also has an influence on interpersonal interactions (Section 2.2.2.7). With all of this in mind, the investigation discovered that some respondents had problems of language fluency, which affected the way they communicated, which in turn, affected information and knowledge sharing. Given a choice, the respondents mentioned how communicating in their mother language is easier and conveys more knowledge (Section 5.2.5). However, generally speaking, all of the respondents were at least bi-lingual and did not have much trouble expressing themselves in English. Language had its challenges, but it was not a major limitation in these small companies.

5.3.4 Cultural dimensions

Section 2.3.4 defines cultural dimensions as essential features that help to classify and understand different cultures. As seen in Chapter 3, this research utilized Hofstede's cultural dimensions. The most relevant in the local scenario, and in South African SMEs, were power distance, individualism and collectivism, as well as masculinity and femininity.

5.3.4.1 Power distance

Having interviewed respondents in the five studied companies, the researcher established that most of the employees in these small companies had a low power distance. Section 3.4.1.3.2 mentions that cultures that have low power distance may have more bottom-up knowledge sharing, as individuals within the lower strata will feel more at ease to voice their opinions to their superiors (Ford and Chan, 2003:14). As was seen in the findings and analysis, employees did not find it difficult to approach or voice their opinions to their superiors. Small companies had this family aspect hence the relationships amongst individuals were cohesive. As for the more senior employees, they also had a low power distance. A high power distance might hinder a senior person to approach a junior employee to seek help. This was not the case in most of these small companies. Table 3.1 in Section 3.4.1.3 outlines that in a low power distance culture, trust is high, there is participative leadership, decentralized decision structures and knowledge sharing is a natural process. Low power distance was identified in this case as the main trend in these small companies as far as information and knowledge sharing was concerned.

5.3.4.2 Individualism and collectivism

Most of the companies that were investigated seemed to portray a more collectivist culture as far as information and knowledge sharing was concerned. In spite of people's different cultural backgrounds, employees seemed to prefer working together as a team rather than as individuals. Employees did not form groups based on the cultures, therefore, these groups comprised of different culture groups. Regular social events and activities that were identified in at least three of the companies ensured that real relationships amongst the employees were built. These relationships were built across cultures. Because of the small number of employees, individuals had to learn to appreciate each other more and work together as a single unit.

Section 3.4.1.3.1 presents the implications of individualism and collectivism regarding information and knowledge sharing. Collectivists are likely to share their knowledge with their group, while individualists are likely to hoard knowledge for themselves, but when they choose to share, they are less restrictive with whom they share (Richards, 2007:175). As seen in the findings, employees in these small companies display more characteristics of collectivism and are willing to share within their company. They are not limited by their cultural differences, but rather, they have formed their own culture group. As seen in Table 3.2 (Section 3.4.1.3.1), individuals in a collectivist culture prioritize the goals of the larger social collective group before self, and this was the case for most of the respondents. Furthermore, collectivist cultures have high context styles (Table 3.2 in Section 3.4.1.3.1), where people rely on the context of non-verbal actions, therefore, they tend to prefer communication media with high media richness such as face-to-face interaction and phone calls. As seen in the findings and analysis section, a lot of information and knowledge sharing took place in the daily meetings, discussions, training sessions, and brainstorming sessions.

A few individuals, however, portrayed individualistic traits where they placed personal goals ahead of the larger social group, which in this case was the company.

5.3.4.3 Masculinity and femininity

Section 3.4.1.3.3 mentions that cultures that are high in masculinity, (namely

competitiveness) may have difficulty with information and knowledge sharing if the competitiveness is between individuals in the company (Ford and Chan, 2003:13). This was not the case in most of the companies that were investigated. Individuals were willing to share knowledge with their colleagues and counterparts, and did not find any reason to hoard knowledge for themselves or hinder other people from accessing their knowledge. Employees also did not find it embarrassing or difficult to approach other employees for help if they faced a certain problem. Table 3.2 identified that a femininity culture has more cooperation and sympathy for the weak. Information and knowledge sharing is a basic value and trust is high, which was the case in most of these companies. Therefore, companies displayed a more femininity culture trait in this case. This is different from a masculine culture where there is more assertiveness, sympathy for the strong, low trust while employees hide knowledge for competitive reasons.

5.3.5 Educational background

Educational background was not a major factor as far as information and knowledge sharing were concerned. Employees did come from different educational backgrounds and they did have different ways of thinking, but they still adapted to the culture of the company. As seen in Section 2.2.2.4, culture is learned and people with different educational backgrounds eventually learn to share together. In this case, the educational backgrounds were similar, since most of the respondents had at least a tertiary level qualification in their area of specialty, so at least as far as this was concerned, they related on the same level.

5.3.6 Race relations

As seen in Section 3.4.2.6, on a typical day people from different cultures in South Africa do not interact that much across race groups. Figure 1 and Figure 2 in Section 3.4.2.6 outlined this. In the investigation, it seems that the aspect of family overrides this fact. Employees in small companies interact more with each other because the number of employees is small and they do not have much of a choice. Therefore, in spite of their cultural differences, employees tend to interact with each other. Furthermore, the culture, which is portrayed in these small companies is family oriented. A lot of social activities take place regularly in order to build bridges across different races. Teams for work-related projects are constantly shuffled so that everyone in the company gets to work with everyone, over and over again.

The following chapter presents the summary and conclusions with reference to the research as a whole.

CHAPTER SIX: Summary and conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Information and knowledge sharing is a crucial aspect in an organization, particularly to improve the competitive edge of the company. With so much competition amongst each other, small companies should harness their information and knowledge resources in order to tap into this unique resource that can improve the value of the company. For this to effectively happen, company-wide information and knowledge sharing should take place. Managing of information and knowledge resources is becoming increasingly relevant to any organization. For a number of reasons small companies have not yet completely engaged with information and knowledge sharing activities. The influence of culture on information and knowledge sharing was the main objective for this research. Different social and cultural backgrounds of employees might have an influence on the quality of information and knowledge sharing, as seen in the research problem. To investigate this, the research identified aspects of social and cultural backgrounds, which might limit effective information and knowledge sharing. The research also sought to identify whether employees come from social and cultural backgrounds that encourage them to share information and knowledge freely.

6.2 Summary

The main research question for this research was:

“How do differences in social and cultural backgrounds affect the way in which employees share information and knowledge with each other within an organization (SME)?”

To effectively answer this, it was important to understand what culture is and to understand its nature and how it affects peoples' individual behavioural traits. Chapter 2, therefore, sought to identify what aspects of culture might have an influence on individuals and, how, this in turn affects sharing.

As seen in Chapter 2, culture is built on various facets, which ultimately define a person or a group of people. Defining culture was an important starting point for this research. Culture has been defined differently depending on where or in what field it is applied. Culture as defined in Chapter 2, consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour, which is acquired and transmitted by symbols, that constitute the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in their artefacts'; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (that is, historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other, as conditioning elements of future action (Kluckhohn, 1951¹² cited by Hofstede, 2001:9). This definition was considered as broad enough to be applied to this research.

To further understand culture, it was important to identify various characteristics of culture. These different characteristics made it easier to have a better understanding of culture. One of the characteristics that was identified was that culture is found in a group setting. Because of this, people who have the same culture inherently relate to each other more easily. This is because they have shared values, beliefs, languages, social backgrounds, behaviours, and communication patterns, hence they have many similarities. Another important issue identified with regard to culture was that culture is learned and built over time. Because of this particular nature of culture, when people from different culture groups are placed together, they can learn each other's cultures over time. In an organizational setting, they can create a culture, which is unique to their organization, and this is something that is built over time.

Culture also has an influence on communication. The way that people communicate is embedded in their culture. Some cultures prefer oral communication, while others are more inclined to written communication. With such differences in employees' backgrounds, it might be a mission to merge different communication patterns and get employees to share freely. Still on communication, language has a crucial role in as far as information and knowledge sharing is concerned. All of this was discussed in Chapter 2 including issues that were identified as influential in respect of culture.

To strengthen the argument on culture, various cultural dimensions that form the thesis of an individual or group's culture were investigated. Cultural dimensions are

¹² Kluckhohn, C. 1952. The study of culture. In D. Lerner and H.D. Lasswell (Eds.), *The policy sciences*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

based on research amongst individuals who have studied how cultures affect the workplace. There are several cultural dimensions, but this research used Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a model. His work is the most referred to in terms of managing cultural diversity. Hofstede identifies different aspects (dimensions), which he states form the way that people from different cultures work. For example, his cultural dimension (power distance) identifies that in some cultures (low power distance) individuals have a free or easy approach to people who are in positions of authority, and hence culture is more lateral in nature. Conversely, people who have huge cultural differences have more fear, or respect to approach people who are in positions of authority, hence a more vertical approach to culture. Issues such as this define peoples' cultures, and these in turn affect how to conduct themselves in information and knowledge sharing.

Having acquired an understanding of culture and its nature, Chapter 3 investigated trends with regard to information and knowledge sharing, in general, but also, specifically, in relation to small and medium enterprises. The objective was to identify whether employees originate from social and cultural groups that encourage them to share information and knowledge. This will address issues regarding whether employees feel free to ask, give or obtain information and knowledge from others. Information and knowledge are different and managing this involves expertise and an understanding of information and knowledge management. Information is easier and less complicated to manage because of its nature, which is more tangible. One of the reasons is that it is easier to store, retrieve and share information. Closely related to information is explicit knowledge, which is also easier to manage because of its tangible nature. Unlike explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge was regarded as more challenging to share, and this was particularly affected more by culture. For example, an individual can fail to articulate his or her knowledge because of his/her inability to express himself/herself in English. Because of this, tacit knowledge was not shared particularly well.

Knowledge sharing involves interaction between at least two or more people. Two individuals can exchange knowledge in the form of sharing ideas, solving problems, mentoring each other, giving each other advice, introducing best practices, and brainstorming. It is this process that can be highly affected by an individual's different social and cultural backgrounds. Because of the differences in culture, people relate to problems differently; people communicate differently; people respond to criticism

differently; people respond to authority differently; and people respond to working in teams differently.

Cultural dimensions shape the way that people think, behave and how they share information and knowledge. The fact that individuals have different cultural backgrounds implies that a company could get people who come from both an individualist and collectivist culture. Knowledge sharing in such cases was seen as difficult as it was not easy to try to mix these two. This applied to all cultural dimensions. Chapter 3 identified that people who have different cultural dimensions share differently.

To conduct the empirical section of the project, qualitative research was the most appropriate approach. Qualitative research would provide an in-depth encounter with respondents. Issues that relate to culture can be sensitive and obtaining data by using quantitative means would not be effective. Instead, talking with people about their culture was more effective. Small companies were selected randomly by using a directory of IT companies. Companies that have different cultural groups were also selected randomly from the narrowed down list, which was shown in Chapter 4. Diversity in companies' workforce was a prerequisite for selection. Five companies with an average of 20 employees were identified. For better results, one of the respondents from each company had to be a senior manager. From the five companies, interviews were held with all the directors, which was helpful to obtain an overview of how the company engages with information and knowledge sharing. Employees from various levels in the company were randomly selected thereafter, but an important aspect was that they would come from different cultural groups. Thirteen respondents that have different cultural groups were interviewed and the results were recorded and transcribed.

6.3 Conclusion

Chapter 5 described to what extent employees in South African SMEs share information and knowledge with other employees regardless of their social and cultural differences. Findings from the interviews indicated that, in general, small companies first of all have an understanding of information and knowledge sharing even though there was no clear definition for a strategy or policy for information and knowledge sharing. In all the companies there were no specific departments or

people who were in charge of information and knowledge sharing, which means that all the companies that were investigated have not developed an information and knowledge sharing structure. However, most of the directors did mention that they do promote information and knowledge sharing. As seen in Chapter 5, measures and techniques were established to support sharing. The directors certainly appreciated the value of sharing, but because of limited resources, they could not have people who were dedicated to managing information and knowledge sharing.

As far as culture is concerned, small companies seemed to employ employees from various diverse cultural backgrounds and according to the literature, this can have an influence on information and knowledge sharing. Sharing of knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, involves interaction with people since the exchange of this knowledge is mainly intangible in form. Culture affects the way that people interact and communicate with each other. After having investigated the companies, it was found that culture has a smaller effect on information and knowledge sharing than expected. SMEs have small workforces, and do not have huge financial reserves, whilst they are constantly busy. Because of this, they should work with each other in spite of their cultural differences. As a result, the family concept was found in this research as one of the main contributors to effective information and knowledge sharing. Issues such as high power distance, individualism and masculinity were hence reduced because of the family concept. Employees who worked closely together in these small companies saw each other more as a family rather than people from different social and cultural backgrounds. This trend is probably also relevant in larger companies where the same situation develops in a small department with a limited number of staff members.

Culture may have an influence on information and knowledge sharing, but as seen in these small companies, they have managed to address this problem. In a well managed small company, sharing becomes easier if the concept of family is nurtured and developed. This concept largely enhances and simplifies information and knowledge sharing.

6.4 Further research

The following are areas of research that should be investigated further in this subject field:

- The influence of culture on knowledge sharing in a public organization (for example, the City of Cape Town's departments)
- Creating awareness of information and knowledge management in SMEs in South Africa
- The importance of technology (for example corporate social media) in the improvement of information and knowledge sharing in the small companies
- The difference between information and explicit knowledge in small enterprises, if such a phenomenon occurs in the corporate world
- Evaluate the impact of culture on knowledge sharing in large South African companies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview schedule

Interview on knowledge sharing

I. Information and knowledge sharing

1. Would you say that you have an understanding of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing?
2. As an individual, do you find it easy to share information and knowledge/ideas with your colleagues?
3. Would you say that your colleagues are willing to, and find it easy to share information and knowledge with you and other colleagues?

II. Information and knowledge sharing and culture

4. Does your company encourage employees to share whatever ideas, or information and knowledge they have with their colleagues?
5. Would you say that trust plays a big role in motivating information and knowledge sharing?
6. Would you say that a reward system would encourage employees to engage in information and knowledge sharing (financial, appreciation)?
7. Are you aware of any formal system or structure in place in your company to support information and knowledge sharing?
8. Do you think that the application of technologies such as Web 2.0 (social networks) can improve information and knowledge sharing, or are traditional face-to-face interactions better? If so, how does it operate?

III. Language and communication

9. Do you think that because English is not a first/home language for some employees limits their ability to share information and knowledge? If yes, why? Would you think that there might be a way round this language articulation barrier to improve information and knowledge sharing within the company?

IV. Cultural dimensions

10. Do employees find it easy to approach their superiors when they need some information or do they find it intimidating to do so?
11. Do you maybe find it embarrassing to ask for information from your colleagues (superiors, subordinates, younger employees)?
12. Do you think that employees would rather hold on to whatever information they have in order to gain a competitive edge, or would they rather share it for the benefit of the company?

V. Educational background

13. Do you think that employees' different educational backgrounds have affected the way that they understand and carry out information and knowledge sharing (appreciation of being a team, competition, socialising)?

VI. Race relations

14. Would you say that employees (yourself included) in the company socialize together in spite of their skin colour, race or language?

VII. General comments

15. Would you say that social and cultural backgrounds limit the way that employees conduct information and knowledge sharing? (General comments).

Information about yourself (confidential):

19. Are you:

1. male
2. female

20. How old are you?

1. Under 20
2. 20-24
3. 25-29
4. 30-34
5. 35-39
6. 40-49
7. 50-59
8. 60 or over

21. How many years of formal school education (or equivalent) have you completed (starting with primary school)?

1. 10 years or less
2. 11 years
3. 12 years
4. 13 years
5. 14 years
6. 15 years
7. 16 years
8. 17 years
9. 18 years or over

22. What is your nationality? _____

23. What was your nationality at birth (if different)? _____

24. What is your home language? _____

25. What is your ethnicity? _____

26. What is your position in the company? _____



April 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

Interview with respondents on the issue of information and knowledge sharing in companies

As a relatively new concept, knowledge management is a set of tools, techniques, methods, behaviours, and approaches that help companies to be more effective. With knowledge as a tool, companies are more likely to gain competitive advantage by particularly exploiting their intellectual capital. This research will be beneficial to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because it seems as if they have not fully appreciated the need to manage knowledge in their companies.

This research project aims to understand the influence of culture on information and knowledge sharing in South African SMEs. With South Africa being a diverse country, companies in this country are perfect examples of where employees from diverse cultures co-exist in one company.

The results of this research might identify cultural barriers that may limit information and knowledge sharing in SMEs. This research will contribute to a way forward when dealing with cultural diversity in SMEs, and will further contribute towards harnessing cultural diversity and turning it into competitive advantage. Tapping into employees' knowledge resources is a critical activity in the 21st century, and by understanding people's culture in diverse SMEs, this can improve information and knowledge sharing.

This interview is expected to take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Confidentiality

Participation of respondents in this interview is completely voluntary. Respondents are assured that all their information will be strictly confidential and anonymous. No references will be made to specific individuals. All responses will be used for academic purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation. An executive summary of this research will be provided upon request.

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Appendix C: Interview results

The following are list of some of the results from the interviews. Because of the large volume of data, the researcher selected just a few of the interview respondents, the following are some of the responses that were detailed and more informative.

Interview on knowledge sharing- Respondent 1 (Company A)

I. Information and knowledge sharing

1. **Would you say you have an understanding of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing?**
 - Yes. Within our company we are not so much...If you take the South African municipality; National treasury is putting a lot of pressure on municipalities to produce a lot of financial reports. Now what happens is that we end up getting those templates for financial reports and writing programs were its quite easy to then populate those reports from the database...We are sharing the information supplied by National treasury although our customers should.... and then we are helping them
 - Within the company we run our own internal training from inside. We are a little bit unique because we very much tend to work alone, but what we do have is... and the nature of our business doesn't help because all our customers are far away because its municipalities in foreign countries even. We are out of the office a lot, so a lot of the information and communication is by e-mail rather than by voice because we are out of the office such a lot, but we do try to have regular meetings were everybody, on a Monday or Friday, when most people can be in the office were we then share. Everybody says... We basically go through all our customers, what's happening with each customer and whose doing what for each customer. So that's how we sort of see what everyone else is doing.
2. **As an individual, do you find it easy to share information and knowledge/ideas with your colleagues?**
 - I find it's easy for me.
3. **On the other hand, would you say your colleagues are willing to and find it easy to share information and knowledge with you, and other colleagues?**
 - I think they do communicate with me

II. Information and knowledge sharing and culture

4. **Does your company encourage employees to share whatever ideas, or information and knowledge they have with their colleagues?**
 - *Yes we try to. We push them to be self-sufficient, because we want ... being a small company, we do not have the time for big training courses, or manpower for that matter, so the people must train themselves...but then... The way they train is by looking at us and finding a problem and then asking someone else to help them solve that problem, and in that way they increase their own knowledge.*
 - *Yes that's fine with me; they do that all the time. (? , 3.52)*
5. **Would you say trust plays a big role in motivating information and knowledge sharing?**
 - *I think trust does. I think also, because we are small, we don't have the red tape, which also makes it easier to open up, and we don't have the competition like in the corporate where there is a lot of backstabbing. We don't have backstabbing.*
 - *We have had that, we had a definite case of that were we had the one employee who just didn't share what he was doing, and it was all his own. When he left, it took a lot of work from us to unravel that. Because he did everything himself, it wasn't documented or anything so. We have a similar situation were, its poor management in a way, we have a couple of people*

who instead of delegating do it themselves so they overburden themselves and the people under them don't have enough work to do.

- *Well its... if I do it, it will take me half an hour, its going to take me 10 minutes to explain it to somebody else and they going to take 3hrs, so I might as well do it myself. That's the average but its wrong*
6. **Would you say a reward system would encourage employees to engage in information and knowledge sharing (financial, appreciation)?**
- *It does work; you have to monitor it all the time. We have a sort of a target, everybody has a target, what we call billboard hours, and when we first introduced it it worked fantastically, but then the people become complacent.... So you have to monitor it all the time*
 - *That works as well, Im not very good at it.*
7. **Are you aware of any formal system or structure in place in your company to support information and knowledge sharing?**
- *We don't have SharePoint but we have our own internal, in fact we have a couple of things really. We have a database with all the work we are doing which is the calls, the helpdesk is open to everybody. So our customers phone in and it all goes into the helpdesk which is available to everybody here to look up, even if there is somebody else doing the job.*
 - *Then we also have our own internal storage facility for all our standards, quotes, rule, anything to do with the actual business of the company*
 - *We try to have a regular meeting and we try to do training*
 - *We have for our customers, this is not for ourselves, we have twice a year what we call a user group meeting. So that's were we share all the latest development in our software with our customers so they get know what happens...*
8. **Do you think the application of technologies such as Web 2.0 (social networks) can improve information and knowledge sharing or the traditional face to face interactions are better? If so, how does it operate?**
- *Well I think they reduce production (facebook, twitter- social networks). At one stage, I haven't done but I am still tossing with the idea of barring facebook from the peoples computers during the day because I believe, it definitely is a drain of production*

III. Language and communication

9. **Do you think English not been a first/home language to some employees limits their ability to share information and knowledge they have? If yes Why? Would you think there might be a way round this language articulation barrier to improve information and knowledge sharing within the company?**
- *Within our company we don't have that, but we do have it with some of our customers. We have quite a few customers in the former Transkei and their English isn't as good as it should be, I would say.*
 - *Overall I would say no, we don't have any problem*
 - *We a couple of employees were Afrikaans is their first language...*

IV. Cultural dimensions

10. **Do employees find it easy to approach their superiors when they need some information or do the find it intimidating to do so?**
- *I am the managing director.*
 - *No, we have a very open sort of policy here. You see these are my two co-directors (next offices, open plan type of thing) and they have been with me quite a long time, as you notice, it's very open.*
11. **Do you think employees would rather hold on to whatever information they have so as to gain a competitive edge, or they would rather share it for the benefit of the company?**
12. **Do you maybe find it embarrassing to ask for information from your colleagues (superiors, subordinates, younger employees)?**
- *I've had this company since 1971 so its 32 years*

- I used to up until a few years ago I would never have to ask anybody, I always knew more than anybody. As far as our software is concerned that's still the case, but technology I have to use the youngsters, because they are more up to date with technology, it doesn't worry me asking them. So I just go ask them. To me that's what I pay them for. But I would never ask them how our software works.

V. Educational background

13. Do you think employees' different educational backgrounds have affected the way they understand and carry out information and knowledge sharing (appreciation of being a team, competition, socialising)?

- It probably does, we possibly don't notice it so much. I think, it's difficult to say. I think you'd probably say yes because people who went to a good school are more likely to have gone on to do a degree, and they are definitely are a better calibre than people who didn't go on to do a degree.
- It could possibly have an effect, we don't notice it that much, I have never thought of it that much before, but definitely on academic prowess

VI. Race relations

14. Would you say that employees (yourself included) in the company socialize together in spite of their skin colour, race or language?

- We do have, because we deal with government we need more blacks but we can't find them. We have a completely open policy; in fact we even employ a Zimbabwean as well. We had two, and the one who was the competitive one, didn't get on with people. She was the one who left. (15.00)
- Yes. We have blacks and coloureds, no Indians actually, but yes everyone interacts

VII. General comments

15. Would you say social and cultural backgrounds limit the way employees conduct information and knowledge sharing? (General comments).

- Knowledge sharing, I will tell also how we share knowledge and information. Every time we change a program we put a note in it, so...I must show you what I mean by that. You can see here that every day, every time that this program has changed, there is a date, who did it, a version number, a particular customer description straight away. As soon as somebody works on that, or if a customer has a problem and we ask him what version it is... In our normal day to day work, we are continuously updating, and when we do our change control, if I might change some programs, it goes into the central repository of all our programs. I have to say, what I do, is there is a log in the change control software which then logs it off so if somebody is to have a problem... they can look into the last few changes that went into the log, so if they are looking at there and within the change control log, and say somebody forgets to make a.... we have a backup.. So to me you have to, it forces people to communicate and if we didn't do that we would not nearly be as efficient as if we had it... So the communication of a ... is very, very important, but you must make it. It shouldn't be a big overhead. If it's going to take 3hrs a day to communication work, it's not going to be worth it. So it must be easy to monitor and easy to do.

If you were to leave the company today, would you say the company would retain what knowledge you have?

- We try and share as much as we can, my opposition of listed companies business connection, Bytes technology, ICL, big companies like that is we just more us. And they fight is like look at their data, its run by a one man show, things like that. If he falls under the bus the company is bugged and a long time ago that was possibly true, but now, if I fall under a bus, all the intellectual property round our software and everything is also well documented, the people know it so well that it's not going to impact anything on our customers or the way the company is run from our point of view of supporting the customers and doing ongoing developments of the software. Where it may fall down is on the actual management of the business, marketing and things like that. ? The intellectual property is not a problem. If I fall under a bus they will be need to find an entrepreneur to take my place. I am trying to groom someone from within but he's not quite ready yet.

As a small company do you maybe have an advantage over big companies when it comes to knowledge sharing?

- I think we do because being small umm... everybody seems to know what everybody else is doing, where the big companies, they have to have a department doing that, e.g. newsletters and things like that So we have quite an advantage, I think.

How do you rate the relationships between employees with their subordinates and superiors?

- I think we tend to go on very well being a small company. We have had employees who do not fit in and they tend to leave. We don't encourage them to leave but we don't encourage them to stay either.

Interview on knowledge sharing- Respondent 4 (Company B)

I. Information and knowledge sharing

1. **Would you say you have an understanding of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing?**

- Ok, I'm going to give you a brief overview of how I see it. In terms of the development process, it's important for us that all developers even if they are not on a project need to be able to help out on another project when somebody falls sick for say a week or something like that, so that's basically we reduce the risk of that. So say some guy should fall sick for a week or two weeks, we can take out a developer put him on that project and he will have to know what the project is about, he'll have to acknowledge it, and immediately jump in and be effective, instead of saying ok, instead of.... into the project. He might not be working on it but at all times but he will be aware of the project and what's happening on the project, so if you refer to knowledge sharing like that, yes.
- I take you'll probably get to how we do that later.
- All our projects sit on a local repository on our server so we'll have, for every project there will be a repository so like if we bring in a new developer onto a project, he'll go onto the repository, check out the code and he will go through... specifications all those things will be sitting on there. We also have an internal wiki on our server where all of us has access to obviously and if for instance, I'm on project X and I encounter difficulties with a certain scenario and stuff and it takes me like a day or two to figure it out and solve it, what I usually do is I'll write up something, put it on the wiki so the guys know, if they do something similar, 'oh hey listen, Henco had a problem with this a few projects ago' they will go look at it and see, ok this is the work around. Then we also have, on a daily basis we have our stand up meetings. In our development process we try to follow the AGILE methodology, so we'll have our daily stand up meetings where everybody just has a few minutes to reflect on what they did yesterday, what they are going to do today and if there's any concerns or red flags which they will then raise up in the stand up meeting. So that way, everybody in the office knows, ok, Julius worked on say function 1,2 &3 and today he's going to work on that and there will be a bit of information of what that function actually is. And then we will take it into separate discussions for the whole specific team on one project, if they need to discuss things more to technical points they'll take it into a separate meeting but the next morning in the stand up meeting we will say ok, this was the problem, this is what we implemented and stuff so we've got a work around now And that will obviously get documented on the wiki and so forth.

2. **As an individual, do you find it easy to share information and knowledge/ideas with your colleagues?**

- Some of us enjoy a lot more documenting and stuff and sharing and stuff like that, for some of us it's a bit of mission with your day to day tasks to solve; you need to manage your time. We try and enforce people to do documentation whenever they work on something. Some people are more open towards that and actually enjoy doing documentation whereas you get your people that doesn't enjoy that so they will write up something on the wiki but it will be like summarised basically, not explaining clearly so but at least you know they've got the knowledge, if you have a question about it you can ask them so you get your characteristics, some people people enjoy documentation and stuff like that, but I find it easy to share especially with the environment we have set up. We also make use of Google's e-mail services... Our whole office e-mail byteorbit.com, but that's a gmail service provider to us. It's a premium package from google for the e-mail service, so we make use of that. So any documentation we do even if it comes down to financial stuff, invoicing, quotes and stuff like that, I will do a quotation on the gmail service share it with Amit, he will have a browse, and say ok this quote is fine, you can send it out so even that level of documentation is shared at least between two people at any given time.

3. **On the other hand, would you say your colleagues are willing to and find it easy to share information and knowledge with you, and other colleagues?**

- Like I said, nobody really has a problem with sharing its just like some might find it difficult to you know, fit in time, especially our developers all of them are very passionate about what they do. So they actually don't want to be bothered with documentation or stuff, they would rather say have a business analyst do this for us or write up the specification but we do involve our developers if we need to do a specification technical or functional for clients. We do involve them in writing it they don't always enjoy it but it really helps with projects... They really want to do development but they know they have to play a few other roles especially

since we are a small company most of us here would cover more than one thing. It's actually , we have been growing quite a lot and stuff and therefore guys have been focusing more on this is what their role is the company. So, we very limited now to deal the roles and stuff. In the beginning we had 4 people and we had to do more than one role, so now we are very focussed and everybody knows what they need to do.

II. Information and knowledge sharing and culture

4. Does your company encourage employees to share whatever ideas, or information and knowledge they have with their colleagues?

- Yes, it's very important for us like for instance, not if just somebody falls sick but say somebody should leave the company usually what a lot of companies would do like if they this guys last day is in a week's time then they will usually say for this last week ok document everything, share people with the right people.... But here with us if somebody were to resign now, they wouldn't need to spend the last week so on, getting everybody else up to speed. They can still effectively work for that full week.
- We still retain whatever knowledge they have
- Like I say, sometimes when we are really busy it does lag behind a bit but as soon as you got that breather after the end of like one project, then we will spend like...usually there's, they might be a day or two before the next project would starts then we spend that time. So it's not always work in progress sometimes after projects done, only then will all the documentation, knowledge sharing happen. But for every project we have like, we following the AGILE methodology as well, usually before the project starts would have a kick off meeting discuss what it's about, get ideas for development, you know what would be the best approach, and then after every project we also have a review meeting saying ok this is what we have done, this is what could have been done better, this is where we can improve for the next project so it's not necessarily knowledge sharing but it's also brainstorming which is good.

5. Would you say trust plays a big role in motivating information and knowledge sharing?

- Not really, not with us. Personally, no. It's a straight forward answer, no. We have dealt with a few clients that we know have got trust issues and stuff, but we, we kind of like a family so everybody will know what they need to do but if they need help they will just involve somebody else, 'are you hectically busy or can you spare 5mins and just help me out here' so we all come from different backgrounds cultures and those things but we share. We are kind of like a family working together So no trust issues

6. Would you say a reward system would encourage employees to engage in information and knowledge sharing (financial, appreciation)?

- Not really. Not really to incentivise the rewards. Everybody here knows what they are working for, and so at the end of the day we... let's take if a new guy starts he will usually have a three months probation and from then on we do a review on an annual basis, basically. So with us, a review is not just about 'you've been here for a year so we need to give you an increase ,we look back at, coz it's important for us, for everybody here to look back into the past year, 'have you grown, have you enjoyed what you've been doing. So then usually in that review they will reflect back and say ok 'this is where I was, and this is where I'm at now, I did grow, and I enjoyed growing'. So we basically, the review is annually we reward them on that basis, basically, since sharing knowledge for us is like part of the daily progress, we don't really do a reward for that and stuff. But the guys know it, if you play along with it then... And sometimes they might be like say a review six months down the line. It's not always fixed but it's usually annually and stuff and the whole past year will be taken into consideration. So if we feel that somebody was a bit stagnant, obviously the reward will increase as well that affects that I mean if we see that this guy has grown a lot, he has been trying to be part of the team and stuff like that, it usually reflects on that. Also since we are a small company we don't use that incentive reward for sharing and stuff. I don't know if there is a lot of companies doing that?

7. Are you aware of any formal system or structure in place in your company to support information and knowledge sharing?

- Well we use wiki's
- Our repository which we use basically on the source code of a project will be there and that's usually all the developers will have access to that
- In terms of administration type of documents and stuff we use Google's premium service. So we've basically, we can say we have these three systems

- And then when it comes to projects team of clients we've got like project management software which we use, where all documentations pertaining a specific project will be on there and we would collaborate with clients via that and not necessarily via e-mail.
- Training in terms of junior guys getting them up to training? We focus a lot on the open source industry as well so there's no real, formal... well you can obviously go study do a software development course focusing on say PYTHON or PHP but since we like the challenges of custom, so we don't usually, we've never actually send anybody on formal training you know, like courses and stuff, it's a point where the company would like to, we would like to get to that point where we decide where we can actually afford and say listen there's this course coming up, it's a week's course and we feel we can benefit a lot if you could pick up on things there. Something we are working towards as we grow, the bigger we get, we would like to be able to send our guys on say a course or even a project, not necessarily development and stuff. So at this stage, what we do is when we getting new recruits, our interview process is kind of a training thing, we interview somebody if we find them fitting, we'll send them a technical assignment which they'll have about two days to complete, 48hrs this is given that they also are still working so they should be able to complete that in the evenings. They send that back, we review, we evaluate it and then we make a decision and so ok we want this guy. Very junior guys like interns type of candidates we do look at and if we find that these guys are trainable, they are willing to learn will take them on if we have capacity in the sense of if we have somebody to spend time with them. If we are really busy we'll tell them listen we really want to take you on but we can't invest time in you now as you would just be sitting here and not knowing what to do but a month down the line, for instance, we've got projects coming to an end so would you be interested in coming that time. So it really depends on the candidate and stuff and then what we do is we'll have, like the technical assignments we usually send more the senior guys applying for positions that they should be able to do that We've got exercises which will then a senior, one of our senior guys will sit with our interns, ok here's this exercise this is the goal of the exercise, this is what you need to achieve and you'll hand it over. The intern will start off the exercise and if they have questions he goes to the senior, he can actually go to anybody else on the team and stuff... The purposes of our exercises are we need to see if you will be able to think for yourself, we need you to be at that point, or internal or junior guy that ...at that point... He needs to not necessarily go and say, ok, what do I need to do, I need to do this, what do I need to do now... He needs to be kind of proactive and stuff, so I mean , we don't always have the tools and stuff and in that cases we provide them and we give them instructions and train them a bit, but no official training. It's more as we see we evaluate every candidate on its own and what that guys needs we provide. If you look at training in that case its very specialised training, this guys perhaps have the know-how you just not familiar with this language or this tools so we'll just introduce them to the tool or something like that
- Well our senior guys will usually delegate to the internal, the junior. They still have their daily task to do but they will be, they'll know that if this guy asks him, they need to, they can't just leave him otherwise the guy will just sit there, so it's very kind of, like I said, a proactive role where, let's say for instance, you're the senior and Im the junior, I will come to you, I'll say , listen, I need help understanding this, you won't necessarily give me the answer or show me how to do it . You ask me, did you look at this, did you try this, did you approach it from this way so in that kind of sense not spoon feeding the guy but getting him up on his own legs. Of course in the end that's what will be most beneficial for him, even if he leaves the company he will be able to stand on his own legs and that's what's important for us.

8. Do you think the application of technologies such as Web 2.0 (social networks) can improve information and knowledge sharing or the traditional face to face interactions are better? If so, how does it operate?

- Well not really, we don't restrict any of that none of the social network things are blocked so we all have access to that, but obviously in work if you're in your lunch time you can do on it what you want. On occasions we will send somebody a link but, I think I've got everybody in the company on my facebook, on my social network, I only use facebook and stuff, if I share something, even if it's not knowledge, but events of the weekend and stuff Im doing they'll be aware of it and stuff, we don't go on a say, get a facebook account, if you don't have one ... specifically because business related things, we try and keep to say our premium services from google project related, on the repository and stuff, and then social things, it's actually also we share a lot of ...I'll send, or Pete or whoever will send an e-mail to everybody saying what you doing this weekend saying, ok there's this meeting at Cape Town PYTHON user group who are interested in going events relevant to not just social and stuff. We'll say ok, this is what's happening and obviously those things will get raised in stand up meetings as well, that's the benefit of that on a day to day basis, you'll know what everybody's been busy with, work related and social related. That's why I say, I think we, this is my opinion , I don't know if there is anybody who will defer from it, but there's a lot..., we like a company, weekend would

come and we all go our own separate ways and stuff, but comes Monday, we all group together and get the work done

- Yah..., I think in a certain way we are a bit divided with the teams here but just because they are different offices so the one office would take lunch at say 1 o'clock where the other office will only take lunch at two o'clock, and some guys, if they hungry they just take, but usually the guys, they take lunch, they walk down to the cafeteria at the Medi clinic. And most of the times you'll find them usually chatting about work and stuff.

III. Language and communication

9. **Do you think English not been a first/home language to some employees limits their ability to share information and knowledge they have? If yes Why? Would you think there might be a way round this language articulation barrier to improve information and knowledge sharing within the company?**

- Yes, I think it can. I'm also experiencing it sometimes myself. Afrikaans is my home language English is a second language. Obviously through the years my English has improved a quite a lot. And in , we've got a few guys, like we've got one guy here, English is his home language, he doesn't really understand Afrikaans and stuff, he understands bits and pieces, and most of the other guys, here, out of the nine only two is English speaking, so sometimes what happens is we will be chatting about a project and we'll be speaking Afrikaans, and this guy will jump in, he can't really participate in the conversation. The guys here are very ethical, as soon as the guy walks into room, the conversation will switch to English just to make him feel welcome. Amit is the English speaking guy, English is his home language and stuff, but he has a better understanding of Afrikaans. So you know in our own little group, if we are just a bunch of guys who speak Afrikaans. We've got a few different cultures in the work area as well, in terms of religion and stuff, just cultural background as well.
- Not really, I mean we all ethical about it, so our...I myself am Christian, Amit is Hindu and stuff, but I mean we respect each other, We are ethical about it, Im not going to,... Most of the guys, or everybody here is one of those that will mock my culture or the way my beliefs, down on you. ... You can choose what you want to believe, stuff like that, we will respect that but we still know we separate that from work. So we separate our personal lives from professional lives, in that way we are making it a lot easier for us to work together as a team and share.

IV. Cultural dimensions

10. **Do employees find it easy to approach their superiors when they need some information or do the find it intimidating to do so?**

- In the past we've had, there were a few guys who didn't find it easy and stuff, we had one very talented junior guy a while ago he didn't find it easy and because of that unfortunately, it was his first job with us and he moved down from Johannesburg so we think he got a bit home sick and everything so after the probation period he resigned, we made an even better offer of course, he was a very good guy but we just think with it being his first job and stuff. We tried to involve him, like if we had a social event or stuff like that but he was always withdrawn and so there comes up to a point were you can do something about it and stuff, so unfortunately he was the only guy that didn't stay on after the probation period. So we not always just looking at attitude at your intellectual characteristics, it's very important for us since we are a such a close team and work well together, you need to be able to fit into the team, so if we'll try and involve you but we also expect you to involve yourself, or get involved. If that's not happening it makes it difficult for us. If we can't communicate with you, we can't work with you. So yah, like I said, there was the one occasion were the guy unfortunately, we tried to keep him on, even though he was bit withdrawn because he was very good , other incidences, you know, we just say sorry you are not fitting in, but that's usually only with the... we've got a very well worked out interview system actually so once we, after we've finally received the task or assignment we send the guy , we'd already know... we kind of are good at gauging what type of person this is, will he fit in. I think that's the most worrisome thing for us as well, when we're getting in new guys... this guy's good and he seems fine but will he fit in and stuff. They usually fit in, the guys here ... I'll be busy and I'll, usually when we get new stuff I'll tell him, listen Im busy if you need anything, come ask me If I tell you I'll be with you know and 10 minutes down the line I haven't come back to you come ask me again, coz, everybody gets tired down in their own little things so they'll say ok I will help you now, but you're so busy that you kind of forget that and only an hour later, once you've finished you remember you need to do that. So if it's urgent we kind of let them know that they should keep on probing and they need to nag us basically and stuff. They don't need to worry about that cause we do understand we also need to ...we can't have... in the end the whole team is effective as the member that's contributing the least, basically, something like that. If you've got a guy here sitting the whole day not really doing anything it brings down productivity of the whole team, I think everybody here is fairly open approachable so we haven't had problems like that like you

say, if we get something like that so the problem with probably with the person maybe being a bit quite or withdrawn and stuff.

11. Do you think employees would rather hold on to whatever information they have so as to gain a competitive edge, or they would rather share it for the benefit of the company?

- No not really, they don't really do it in that way, Like I said the beginning, some guys are open sharing whereas other guys you have to ask them 'do you know how to do this and stuff', and then they will tell you yah, and then they will be open to sharing, but they are very much caught down in their own day to day activities so yah, I don't recall any history of anybody holding something back in the negative benefit of the team. They might hold something back in terms of nobody specifically asked them if anybody has done this type of thing before and they haven't shared it yet so, but then the stand up meeting comes and somebody will say, 'this is what I need to do today, I don't understand this you, know, this is concern for me because I'm too sure what I need to do'. Then someone will say 'ohh I have actually worked on something similar six months ago' ...

12. Do you maybe find it embarrassing to ask for information from your colleagues (superiors, subordinates, younger employees)?

- No actually not. I think we very fortunate, I've come from a few other companies as well where in the office there was a lot of, we call, "politics" so like this guy will be senior and I would say be junior and I would say, why don't we do something like this and he just say like no. There's been a couple of occasions where say the senior guys actually learn from the junior guys something which you know, they haven't think of it in a similar way an stuff, so I think in terms of knowledge sharing in general that's a benefit, if... you need to be open to new ideas and there's like yah... so there's been quite a few occasions were the senior guys actually picked up something valuable from the junior guys and said 'wow, cool' and not offended at all because they all improving themselves. So they've got that thrive

V. Educational background

13. Do you think employees' different educational backgrounds have affected the way they understand and carry out information and knowledge sharing (appreciation of being a team, competition, socialising)?

- In our company no, it definitely plays a role..., once again, we're fortunate it doesn't really affect us but, it definitely, I'm also from past experience. It does affect work environments quite a lot and stuff in a lot of other companies as well. In our incidence, not really. So yah

VI. Race relations

14. Would you say that employees (yourself included) in the company socialize together in spite of their skin colour, race or language?

- Yes, yes. One guy we've got here, Julius, he's from Zimbabwe and stuff originally. He's a South African citizen now. Then we've got Amit, whose Indian and stuff and most of our others are Caucasian, white people so I mean, at this stage, those are the few races we have in here. We're very strong on... Like every Friday afternoon at about say half an hour before its time to go home, we'll say ok, we'll make sure that your work's done half an hour before you go we'll take a break and we'll have a chat in the one office here, the bigger office or stand on the balcony, we'll have a drink so we do socialize. Once in a while we'll have a company social, we don't just have the once a year end of year function, we'll have a company social were we will go out we'll socialize and we try to switch off from work completely. Two weeks ago we had a wine tasting, which we went out as a company to a wine farm, did some wine tasting for most of hear it was a first and stuff. Then you'll get occasions were somebody, most of the guys here, you can see the only thing they have in common are work but then you'll get like you group and stuff. These guys are together quite a lot, they actually socialize about. Even in the small company, we have different social circles and stuff but as a unit together like when we alike at a social, we'll say you'll find somebody talking about ..., you are not allowed to talk about work. That's how we get to know each other and stuff

VII. General comments

15. Would you say social and cultural backgrounds limit the way employees conduct information and knowledge sharing? (General comments).

- No, not really. There are other guys here that don't come with formal education and some of our senior guys here doesn't have any formal qualification, say the one one guy has an accounting degree and stuff but he got interested in programming and pursued that and he's

actually one of our senior guys and stuff. So that's why when I say we hire on merit its not to say you need this qualification, its can you do the job. And through the years we've actually defined, our interviewing process. We'll pick up the guy, he's got the heart We kind of look for those things. We've got this saying going ' 20% apttitude and 80% attitude will get you there". Its like do you wanna do I think a lot of these guys here, they know what they wanna do, they know what they wanna achieve and they enjoy what they do so in terms of sharing working together as a team that compliments everything so that's why I say we're really one of the lucky companies. Like I said, its difficult getting the correct person and when I say that I refer obviously to skill, but not just that, skill personality. You need to get that candidate that type of guy So I mean if you've got the ryt guys then all of these things shouldn't be a problem.

As a small company do you maybe have an advantage over big companies when it comes to knowledge sharing?

- I think so yes, we always say we are a small company with a big company mentality and stuff, and we, everybody here, well I for one ...even our team of say six developers can take on a big company with a team of say 12 developers. We kind of feel that our guys here can take on two guys of theirs. If we say. So we're also very we don't really have titles for it, like have a developer..., we'll know this guy is junior, senior or intermediate and stuff. But, we'd get cv from guys feeling they're senior and then they'll do their assignments we tell that you're intermediate you're not senior in our eyes so we've got quite a high standard for that but when we say our junior guys can take on two juniors of any other company we confident when we kind of say that an stuff. So especially with the knowledge sharing they're doing and working together as a team and stuff. If you've got a team of twelve taking on our team of six those twelve people aren't going to work together on it. If there's going to be any descriptances or conflicts within that team its going to be a problem, whereas we don't have the problem because the guys, like on every project we mix and match the teams like for instance we've got two projects running currently say, and there'll be two teams of three... then after these two project end there'll be another two projects coming and we say ok let put these guys' so we match a team. Everybody here has worked with everybody else on the project so I think that counts a lot for us in terms on taking on big companies

How do you rate the relationships between employees with their subordinates and superiors?

- Family

Interview on knowledge sharing- Respondent 8 (Company C)

I. Information and knowledge sharing

1. **Would you say you have an understanding of the benefits of information and knowledge sharing?**

- Yah, there's a lot of different things I think, the one thing is kind of communication between us. We consultants so people are out and about all the time working on different projects. So there's quite a lot of need for us to kind of get together and have touch base and have meetings and things like that. So we've got a couple of meetings in the place. We have a staff meeting that we have sort of once a week, if we can manage. We aim for once a week, sometimes its maybe three times a month so. And then we have departmental meetings, we have our information management system also our IT department; we meet regularly and touch base. And then we have a research meeting with the research team, that's also on a weekly basis. And then on a monthly basis we have what we call a business management meeting with the three managers
- So that's the kind of formal place to discuss the things we need to discuss
- And then obviously there's e-mail, we have a shared calendar. So we have a google calendar that everybody puts their appointments onto. That's web based so wherever we are I can access it on my phone, so people can see where everyone is all the time. So we don't need to communicate ... I think that's very useful, when you're trying to set something up, you can just check where people are. And then I'm not in office a lot, I the director, so a lot of job is out so people can also know when I'm out and if they need me for a meeting they know ok on Wednesday afternoon maybe it might work. So
- And then obviously you can see it's an open plan office so the research team sits together so if they want to talk about stuff they're together. And then the managers are together so...

2. **As an individual, do you find it easy to share information and knowledge/ideas with your colleagues?**

- Not really. I mean there's the stuff that I was talking about earlier which is kind of what we doing and where we are which is one thing. But actually what we learn as we do our work is a bit more difficult to share. So we work on project together and the obviously there we work on important things together for example I go to a lot of conferences, and obviously picking up a lot of knowledge and it's very difficult to make time for that.
- We have stuff development sessions four times a year and at those we are supposed to sort of decide what the best stuff is to share and then share it. In fact for a while we did monthly staff development sessions where each month somebody had we had different member of stuff to present. It wasn't that effective we found, it was alright, it just took up quite a lot of time and we're quite busy, so we decided on it four times a year. So we do have those sessions but there's obviously a lot of stuff you know because we're working with research we all learning stuff all the time. So I don't think you can really share that all the time, but what we do, do is we have, like I said they have research meetings were they're talking about the projects. And then we also when we are working on reports we make sure that everybody reads the report, so at least they learn what we were working on and what came out of it, but it's not the same kind of learning.
- See there's a difference between knowledge in terms of like content because remember we do research so you learn about other people's projects so there's that kind of knowledge versus knowledge about processes or how to do things and those are two different things, so I would say they'll probably take a lot of content in their heads but in terms of how we do our work, I mean I have stuff changing over and it doesn't really matter. We're quite good at document, I mean we've got our processes are documented and updated all the time

3. **On the other hand, would you say your colleagues are willing to and find it easy to share information and knowledge with you, and other colleagues?**

- You'd have to ask them, but I think so. It's quite an open..., there's quite a lot of talking. And we are mostly women so that helps. We share better.

II. Information and knowledge sharing and culture

4. **Does your company encourage employees to share whatever ideas, or information and knowledge they have with their colleagues?**

- It is encouraged, it's just a question of timing and for us to make the time just to have staff meeting, it's quite a... we have to make the time. We all busy and we are all working on projects and it's a project based company so the projects pay the costs obviously. So the time

to do anything that's not project work is, you have to find money for that so we can't just spend days and days just doing internal things.

5. Would you say trust plays a big role in motivating information and knowledge sharing?

- It does play a role but I think the culture of this company is very open we're all about finding information figuring out what's going on, there's a lot of collaboration in our thinking. It's definitely very high trust here. There's nobody withholding anything. Its more the time just to catch up with each other. People don't hold back

6. Would you say a reward system would encourage employees to engage in information and knowledge sharing (financial, appreciation)?

- We used ... staff development sessions every month; we used to make it a lunch as well. So if we were doing a staff development session we had to bring stuff to eat or stuff to make it nice. So we try to incentivize it in that way but like I said time is an issue. We did it for quite a while and then we were like ok it's enough. We are tired of learning now. But other than that I think the other knowledge sharing thing that come to that is to incentivise people to go to conferences
- Yah I go quite a lot. Personally but we also encourage people to apply for travel rewards and things like that and not through us but the official ones. They haven't really taken them up but this year there's a local conference which we will encourage people to go to and if there are any seminars... we will go. We share, especially when someone is working on a particular project and there's something interesting, then we will encourage them to go. They have to come back and tell us about it. So we do that in the staff session, they only feedback for like half an hour

7. Are you aware of any formal system or structure in place in your company to support information and knowledge sharing?

- We have a server and everything that everyone does is on there. So it's always accessible we do have a web based system as well, that's for contacts and information and things like that. But in our work, we're doing a lot of literature, a lot of research so there's a lot of documents and reading, so all that gets loaded onto the server. So it's all there, we've got an internal kind of a resource centre, which is on the server. So there's a lot of stuff there, whether people use it I don't know

8. Do you think the application of technologies such as Web 2.0 (social networks) can improve information and knowledge sharing or the traditional face to face interactions are better? If so, how does it operate?

- Yah, I think there are useful, I prefer face to face networks myself for business. I'm in a lot of networks and groups, strategic ones and they are very useful, the face to face ones, they're useful. Facebook stuff like, obviously they're useful, but I have a few very good networks of people that I trust and we do a lot of collaboration from those ones. So it's mainly face to face networks, which are more effective

III. Language and communication

9. Do you think English not been a first/home language to some employees limits their ability to share information and knowledge they have? If yes Why? Would you think there might be a way round this language articulation barrier to improve information and knowledge sharing within the company?

- Last year we had three people that were first language Afrikaans and out of 8 of us, they speak Afrikaans to each other. Sometimes we all kind of speak Afrikaans to them. They're very much bi-lingual and our work is all done in English so most of the people are really comfortable. You have to be because we work in English. When we do need to do work in other languages, we have people who like do field work in other languages, and translations. And then we work with people who ...In the actual office and with our clients, its English based

IV. Cultural dimensions

10. Do employees find it easy to approach their superiors when they need some information or do they find it intimidating to do so?

- I hope so...Im pretty approachable. I think Im quite busy so they know they can't just ask me things whenever they feel like so its more a case of, you know, I will get back to them because Im in meetings a lot through the day so Im not always immediately available but I will always make the time if it needs to and we have an office day on a Monday so we all are in the office, that's the idea. So Monday is the day, unless it's something urgent, then other than that there

are two managers behind me who are the frontline, who will take issues, queries etc and they are quite approachable as well. If it's something urgent, then they will get a hold of me and say this is urgent; you need to deal with it. So there is a way and we will always make time and I work any hours so I'm always around

11. Do you think employees would rather hold on to whatever information they have so as to gain a competitive edge, or they would rather share it for the benefit of the company?

- No, everyone is encouraged to excel here and for the company to excel. You don't have to step on anybody else to do well. That's definitely out of our culture

12. Do you maybe find it embarrassing to ask for information from your colleagues (superiors, subordinates, younger employees)?

- Yeah, it's not a problem, especially when it comes to things that they are busy with. If they are busy setting things up or arranging things and I don't know, I have to ask them how to do it. That's fine yeah, I have no problem asking, and they have no problem sharing

V. Educational background

13. Do you think employees' different educational backgrounds have affected the way they understand and carry out information and knowledge sharing (appreciation of being a team, competition, socialising)?

- *I don't know for schools so much all of these are very bright, all of my stuff, they are well educated. They all have Masters or PhDs, Except Alison who is administrative and Douglas who is IT. He's got IT qualifications. So everyone is pretty educated. We do research so you have to be. What we did find is that you find different higher education institutions produce different kind of thinking. So I don't know about school so much coz they all very post grad. Like I went to UCT and there's a particular way we got taught This work that we do and so I find that people who have a similar training are easier to pick up and they've got a similar base of knowledge, they come from a similar base of knowledge. But then there is a lot of things we learn from doing in the company but it's that sort of paradigm or something. And also like foundational stuff, it's not just university wise, it's also discipline. So what discipline they studied also affects how they see things. So for example we had someone who had sociology Masters and she never quite, the models we use when we evaluate are quite different from sociology models. She was always seeing things from a different perspective which she couldn't quite translate into this work. Then we someone who had a history background and she couldn't also translate into this work because ours are very much client driven so its, you got to write sharp and short and punchy and think about themes and she was very much kind of like rumble, rumble... all the background. So its discipline, but I would also say higher education make a difference.*

VI. Race relations

14. Would you say that employees (yourself included) in the company socialize together in spite of their skin colour, race or language?

- Not really but again I would say it wasn't really a race thing that was ever an issue. There was one girl who a little highly politicised and we're pretty un-peacy. Because we see so much stuff all the time in the townships we quite like make fun of everything across the board and none of us are racist or homophobic, but there was one girl who took issue... she wanted things to be more race oriented and. Again it was a background thing, her training was in gender and race issue. And so she kept putting that lense on to things. So that really didn't work out. Other than it's really interesting because people share their different perspectives and we look for trends a lot which is interesting so we learn from each other I'd say more than anything else. But there is also like people from Durban vs. people from Johannesburg. So there's lots of differences so we generally pick them up and talk about them and make fun of them. We had one issue with one girl who, it was very small and it was very quickly dealt with

VII. General comments

15. Would you say social and cultural backgrounds limit the way employees conduct information and knowledge sharing? (General comments).

- I think you have make time for it and we try and do what we call action learning it doesn't always work coz you kind of assume people know stuff but generally to teach people stuff instead of just sitting down and telling them, they just come with, so if we have interns and stuff like they come with us to workshops because they then learn from been part of it rather than us trying to explain it. I would say that the main way of, its more experiential

- There is quite a lot of mentorship from the senior staff definitely, but it's more in terms of actually doing work than kind of general. Like these are the principle of this... we don't do that, it's more, when it's time to do this then we will... like say for example, we have to go for field and someone needs to know how to do field work they will go and watch a field work then we will debrief and talk about it and then we will let them try and will give them tips. So its very action learning based it's not theoretical. Some theoretical, a little bit but it will be more like, go read these things and then come with

How do you rate the relationships between employees with their subordinates and superiors?

- I think they are very good. It's pretty open and everyone sort of has a personal relationship as well. We know each other's personal stuff not all of it obviously but if someone is having an issue, they don't have to cover it up they can say look this is what's happening
- We normally get food and sit in the lounge, or kitchen. It's very chilled and there's a lot of chatting that's not work related. And we always celebrate birthdays and things like that. And always go to each other's birthday parties. We have good relationships

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