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# Cultural Differences among Occupational Groups and their Impact on Communication Processes – The Case of Domain Experts and Decision Makers

*The paper discusses the role of cultural differences in the communication among occupational groups, such as domain experts and decision makers. On the basis of three explorative case studies, the authors identify four cultural dimensions to distinguish the occupational cultures of domain experts and decision makers, namely: reflective versus action oriented, risk averse versus opportunity seeking, detail oriented versus overview seeking, functionality oriented versus benefit oriented. They discuss the implications of creating awareness for specific cultural differences and, in particular, consider the role of boundary objects in mediating the different meanings across various occupational cultures to create a shared understanding.*

## Introduction

Culture is a polysemic concept that is no longer constrained to the level of nations or ethnic groups. More and more, culture is conceptualized in respect to smaller units (Hepp 1999) such as social classes (e.g. working class culture, civic cultures), age (e.g. youth culture), musical preferences (techno-culture), organizations and organizational sub-units (Hofstede 1998; Sackman 1992; Schein 2004), as well as professions. In all of these conceptions, culture is viewed in terms of *values and practices* (Giddens 1994; Hofstede 1998; Williams 1981). It is conceptualized as a symbolic, meaningful system that informs actions (Kroeber / Parsons 1958) and guides us in the way that we make sense of our environment. In this understanding, culture has an integration function and embeds individuals in a group. When adapted to smaller cultural units, this view of culture helps to develop a critical reflection on a particular culture, and to appreciate other cultures.

In the organizational context, culture has also been discussed in terms of *professions* (Barber 1995; Carayannis/Sagi 2001; Hofstede 1998; Raelin 1986). Occupational groups such as media specialists, lawyers, software specialists, film celebrities, etc. show specific cultural characteristics that are not primarily based on national, religious, or ethnic traits. They are the result of a particular professional setting (Barber 1995; Carmel 1999). Hofstede (1998) has shown that professional cultures become important elements for organizational subcultures if tasks are non-routine and difficult, and work is consequently carried out by very skilled and specialized personnel (i.e., knowledge workers).

While traditional views of culture often emphasize the integration function of culture, culture can alternatively be understood as a *scheme of second order observation*, as an invitation to observe how we observe (Romano 1999). As such, culture is the perspective of observers' observations (Luhmann 1995: 54) and as thus broaches the *contingency* of a certain perspective and fosters *comparisons*: How does a

certain group observe and how does it relate to the way another group observes? In such an understanding, culture does not fix identities, but rather focuses attention on the relativity of a certain perspective.

This article is therefore based on the premise that the concept of culture can be fruitfully employed to explore the relativity of professional perspectives and to create awareness for *challenges in the communication* between two 'culturally diverse' occupational groups. The communication and integration of knowledge across occupational groups is particularly challenging (Bechky 2003; Black et al. 2004; Carlile 2002; Henderson 1995). Bechky, for example, showed that the communication between engineers, technicians, and assemblers is difficult because they lack common ground, which is manifested in differences in language. She describes how engineers and assemblers, although talking about the same object, had such different perspectives and understandings of it that they continuously misunderstood each other. Not being aware of these (cultural) differences, the misunderstandings between the two occupational groups remained hidden for a long time (Bechky 2003: 320).

In this article, we will focus on the communication between two specific occupational groups – experts, on the one hand, and decision makers, on the other – and argue for the crucial role of culture in this communicative constellation. Decision makers who have to take decisions in complex, uncertain, and fast-moving environments increasingly call on experts. In the political context, for example, the Swiss public administration, which itself provides expertise to public policy makers, assigned 6100 mandates to external experts in 2004 alone, for which it spent a total of 490 million Swiss Francs (307 million Euro) (Geschäftsprüfungskommission der Schweiz 2006). Referring to experts allows decision makers to absorb the uncertainty of the environment, to delegate responsibility, to enforce an already taken decision, but also, and perhaps most impor-

tantly, to make informed decisions. In this last case, the fact that the decision makers call on experts in their decision making requires that they acknowledge their partial ignorance of an issue. Knowing not to know is itself a cultural competence as mentioned by Baecker (2002: 151). Thus, the expert-decision maker situation presupposes a certain awareness and appreciation of differences in perspectives and in culture. However, not knowing what these cultural differences precisely consist of can be challenging for the communication that unfolds between experts and decision makers. If a decision maker knows that a certain orientation, perspective, practice, or value is part of the expert's occupational 'culture', he or she has better means to appreciate it and question his or her own perspective. *Knowing the specific cultural differences among occupational groups is thus a first condition to overcome the communicative barriers across these groups.*

In the following, we hence aim to identify how domain experts and decision makers describe their relative 'cultures'. In particular, we seek to exemplify how these differences manifest themselves in the knowledge-intensive communication between the two groups. In making such differences explicit, we believe that both professions can create a greater awareness of their *modus operandi* and learn how to appreciate and better deal with the practices, values, and interpretation schemes of the other group. We present various dimensions of the occupational cultures as described by experts and decision makers. Such an approach was already followed in earlier studies, in which cultural differences within and across organizations were discussed in terms of various dimensions along which these cultures differ (Burns/Stalker 1961; Hofstede 1980). Hofstede (1998) for example presented six dimensions (e.g. process oriented vs. results oriented; employee oriented vs. job oriented; parochial vs. professional) for the identification of three sub-cultures within organizations (a professional, an administrative, and a customer interface culture).

We aim to explore if there are such cultural dimensions also for the occupational groups of experts and decision makers. We propose that there are specific cultural characteristics that hold not only for single types of experts (e.g. engineers, IT architects, financial analysts) or decision makers (CEOs, department managers, project managers), but for the occupational group of *domain experts* and that they differ from those of *decision makers*.

## Method

Our research design employs a qualitative analysis of three explorative cases and considers within-case and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt 1989). Since there is no sufficient prior research to date that compares the occupational cultures of experts and decision makers with regard to knowledge integration, an explorative approach seems adequate. In

the case studies, we have analyzed the descriptions of the knowledge communication between domain experts and decision makers in three contexts: 1. engineers and the management team of a manufacturing company (1<sup>st</sup> company); 2. IT-specialists and middle managers of the business line of an insurance company (2<sup>nd</sup> company), 3. consultants specialized in facility-, portfolio and construction management and their clients (3<sup>rd</sup> company).

For every case study, we have conducted 15 in-depth interviews with both experts and decision makers, each lasting on average 45 minutes (in total 45 interviews). In the interviews, after an introductory part on the background of the interviewee and his/her work context, we asked to describe the communication with the experts, respectively decision makers (e.g. communication formats, processes) and then invited interviewees to recall episodes of their communication that exemplify typical communicative behavior of both experts and decision makers (thus employing a narrative interview style). In the final part of the interviews, we asked them for typical challenges and practices in their communication with the other occupational group. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed word-by-word. We recursively coded the transcriptions of the interviews. We used open coding (Glaser 1998) and added tags with comments or categories to the transcribed text. We compared tags first within the single cases and then across cases and used tables (Miles/Huberbert 1984) to further structure coding categories. In a first step, both authors developed categories independently from the transcripts, and then met to discuss differences and similarities of the individual work and iteratively came up with the dimensions defining the occupational culture of experts and decision makers reported below.

For the theoretical sampling of the three case studies (Glaser 1998), we have selected case contexts in which experts and decision makers can be easily identified and there is a clear functional difference between the two roles (the experts' role is mostly one of providing advice). In addition, all decision contexts show a considerable complexity (ambiguous and dynamic contexts) and knowledge asymmetry (i.e., experts know a lot about their domain, but little about the overall corporate context, and vice versa for the decision makers). We introduced variety across cases with regard to the industry, organizational, and institutional contexts in which the communication between experts and decision makers takes place. Case company number one is a medium-sized German high-tech firm. The experts in this context are mostly engineers with a specialization in production and material sciences. Decision makers are the members of the top management team. Case company number two is a large multinational insurance company, where experts are IT-analysts and programmers and decision makers are middle managers with line or project responsibility. Case company three is a small facility man-

