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Investigating knowledge management: can KM really change organisational culture?

Alison Corfield and Rob Paton

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship of knowledge management (KM) with organisational culture, a subject of interest to academics and KM practitioners.*

Design/methodology/approach – *It is based on case study research in the voluntary sector, which is relatively less studied than the commercial or public sectors.*

Findings – *One major finding was that although culture was recognised as an intricate concept, KM programmes were often simplistically intended to "change culture". Two instances of long-term change were identified. Strong and persistent leadership, with a clear rationale for culture change, and also a well-established technology innovation programme, using local "champions" to help align knowledge programmes with daily work routines, did have an impact on organisational culture.*

Research limitations/implications – *The findings provide food for thought for practitioners in the voluntary sector. As external pressures and common technology are leading the different sectors to follow more similar work practices, it is likely that the findings of this paper will have relevance also for other sectors, where organisations face similar resource constraints.*

Practical implications – *The paper provides a thoughtful analysis of data collected over several years that suggests sectoral differences will not be the crucial factor to consider when looking at the impact of KM.*

Originality/value – *It provides practical examples of what has worked to "change organisational culture" and what has not, as well as ideas for future research.*

Keywords *Information technology, Knowledge management, Organizational culture, Business strategy, International organizations, Voluntary*

Paper type *Case study*

1. Introduction

Is the union of knowledge management (KM) and organisational culture a match made in heaven? It is a mainstay of KM theory that the two are firmly entwined. As an example: "We believe knowledge management takes us into the realm of corporate culture, reputation, value systems and those other evidences of the social nature of man" (Spender, 2000, p. 158). This article assesses the relationship of KM with organisational culture, in the context of the voluntary sector, specifically focusing on examples from international development charities.

Considering this interplay, certain questions arise:

Q1. Do organisations have distinctive cultures, and if so, are these linked to their sector?

Q2. Can KM programmes play a role in culture change in the voluntary sector?

Q3. What approaches best support KM as a successful agent of cultural change?

The answers to these questions are relevant to those who work in the voluntary sector. The perspectives also have interest for all business sectors, given that public and voluntary

sectors have moved closer to the commercial world in recent years, as well as for all KM professionals and academics who study organisational culture.

In the discussion that follows, the first section considers issues of defining KM and "organisational culture", and identifies insights from the relevant literature. It also highlights the current climate faced by voluntary sector organisations. From this, a theoretical framework is established to tackle the questions raised.

The second section identifies the research on which this article is based. The methodology incorporated three case studies, which investigated KM in the voluntary sector. The studies took place in three international development charities based in the UK. The research included intensive sessions of interviews, observation and document search; and contacts were continued for a period of up to eight years to allow an element of longitudinal research. The purpose of the study was to identify where KM was working successfully, and to consider the factors that contribute to that success. One theme was to identify cultural issues, and to delve more deeply into the relationship between organisational culture and KM activity.

The third section presents the key findings from the study. Data relating to the nature of culture and the ways in which it can be changed are presented, together with evidence of when KM has affected cultural manifestations. Key points are illustrated with direct quotations from interview data.

Finally, the implications of these findings for organisational leaders, knowledge managers and practitioners are highlighted. The findings are considered within the context of the changing world of KM practice in the voluntary sector, to identify how they can be useful to build successful KM programmes within a diverse range of organisations, each with its own unique organisational culture.

2. Conceptual framework

Every organisation has to demonstrate that it is providing the very best service for its limited resources, and voluntary organisations have a huge demand to meet. As a result, they require the best management techniques, so that organisations can demonstrate that they are using scarce resources effectively. KM is a relatively new management tool to improve the capacity of an organisation and to ensure that resources are well used.

The voluntary sector has seen considerable change in the early twenty-first century. Global developments such as terrorism, health threats, economic shocks, natural disasters and climate change affect their world. The dominant political consensus emphasises the need for the voluntary sector to match commercial models. Charities can no longer assume that they will be trusted and respected. Schemes to set targets for charitable outcomes, as well as monitoring and evaluation programmes, are now required to demonstrate efficiency to donors, who can therefore assume more power to influence what programmes are set and how they are achieved (Bird and Westley, 2011, p. 17). This is the setting for the KM programmes and organisational culture discussed in this paper.

2.1 Knowledge management

KM has been formulated as a specific management discipline since the 1990s, and it has grown in popularity since it was first introduced into commercial firms. From there, it has penetrated into both the public and voluntary sectors. In the case of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) community, major global funders such as the World Bank and DFID have publicly embraced KM, and so that is one more powerful reason for charities to take up KM.

A steady stream of books and articles has attempted to define the terms knowledge and KM (Jashapara, 2011, p. 13). From many competing definitions, two working definitions are adopted for this article: "knowledge is information in context, together with an

understanding of how to use it" (Brooking, 1999, p. 5). Thus, knowledge – sometimes viewed as a resource to be stored and kept available for future use, or more frequently presented in the form of flows that need to move around the organisation – is an essential element that supports organisational capacity. KM can be defined as the management perspective, and associated practical activity, intended to make the best use of the knowledge resources available to an organisation to meet its productive opportunities.

Practical KM includes an extensive list of potential activities. At the extreme, Hull (2000, p. 60) has suggested that more than 100 different options exist as activities within the scope of KM. Core ideas include:

■ learning organisation theory (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990);

■ knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995);

■ intellectual capital (Brooking 1996, Stewart, 1997); and

■ communities of practice (CoP) (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

The application of emergent technology infrastructures, such as intranets and associated knowledge stores, and, more recently, the use of social media, is also a regular ingredient of KM programmes (Jashapara, 2011).

KM is not a simple formula for organisations to pick up and import. Instead, the challenge is to consider how KM approaches and associated activities can fit with the existing purposes and problems faced by the organisation in its specific context and environment. Organisational culture forms a major part of that context.

2.2 Organisational culture

The concept of organisational culture was popularised in the 1990s, as books documenting investigations into the factors that led to organisational excellence were published (Miller, 2012). It is another term that involves highly complex ideas, making definition difficult. One example, in the words of the eminent author, Hofstede (2001, p. 9), is "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another".

This example connects the concept of culture to studies of traditional ways of life, where the term is frequently used in national or tribal contexts. "Organisational culture" suggests that similar assumptions, values and norms are established within an organisation that then provide the setting for the conduct of organisational behaviour, relationships and decision-making.

For the purpose of this discussion, organisational culture is informed by Schein's (2010) work. Schein formalises the ideas of norms, values and assumptions into three levels. At the general level, an organisation will have artefacts that demonstrate the way things are done, visible through observed behaviours. The second level is the espoused values, which speak of what the organisation claims is the basis for its actions. At the deepest level, basic beliefs constitute the foundation for the assumptions on which organisational culture rests.

Within one organisation, there may be many sub-cultures, as groups form around their own common characteristics. These could be linked to geography, market, hierarchy, function or internal divisionalisation. Recognition of these sub-cultures makes the study of organisations much more complex. They can lead to fragmentation or the formation of boundaries or "silos" that reduce communication. Nevertheless, culture cannot be understood by fragmenting it into component elements: "The critical caveat is that the most valuable knowledge is complex, tacit and deeply embedded in each other's cultural context" (Brannen, 2009, p. 96).

There is considerable literature on organisational culture and how to assess, categorise and manage it. Examples include the competing values model (Cameron and Quinn, 1999), as well as various developed assessment tools (Harrison, 1995; Denison

et al., 2012). Some authors suggest that there are key characteristics for different types of organisations, such as "normative" (Etzioni, 1975, p. 272) or "support orientated" (Harrison, 1995, p. 195). These characteristics have then been linked to charities as being congruent with their central purpose.

In the past decade, some authors have looked at how KM and organisational culture theory can be integrated, so that the relationship between them is more clearly understood. Alavi *et al.* (2005) recognise that KM processes are heavily influenced by the social settings in which they are embedded. Leidner and Kayworth (2006) extends this to consider the potential impact of competing values among organisational sub-groups. Rai (2011), while noting that there is hardly any consensus with regard to a general theory of organisational culture, uses the competing values model to develop links with Nonaka and Takeuchi's knowledge creation quadrant. While these attempts draw out commonalities between the two fields of study, they remain limited to particular elements. Competing values model and knowledge creation, for example, are far from the only theories that underpin the two component parts. For this study, therefore, these tentative steps to integration are a useful pointer to future theory development, rather than a model to be applied now. It is perhaps utopian to believe that a model can be developed that combines the full complexity of these two fields. It is certainly the case that this is far from achieved yet, as the range of cultural variables and potential KM approaches is so great.

One key element of studying culture that renders it far more complex than many descriptions or measurement systems admit is to consider how it changes. Culture is habitual behaviour, but this characteristic does not mean it cannot alter or evolve over time. "In this regard, culture is not an exogenous monolithic force imprinting itself on society, but is constructed on a continuous basis as individuals navigate, understand and act in organisations" (Nakata, 2009, p. 13).

Culture may be resistant to change, as it is woven deeply into the fabric of the organisation, but in the current environment, there are huge and complex pressures on organisations, and particularly those in the voluntary sector, to adapt to new political and economic realities. Charities face questions about their role in society and how they justify their existence. This factor is particularly true for international charities. As an example, the pressure to deliver monitoring and evaluation programmes that demonstrate that they are meeting donor requirements may conflict with an intention to devolve power to their recipients as the legacy of colonialism is continually questioned. Charities are encouraged "to adopt a business model, which especially looks for and rewards efficient utilization of organisational resources" (Bird and Westley, 2011, p. 11). These pressures may affect the basic assumptions of the organisation and, thus, pull the culture in very different directions.

Schein's (2010, p. 317) work offers a way to assess culture in organisations, using group discussions. When a problem is identified, it is sensible to investigate what elements of the culture help or hinder solutions. He suggests that the position in an organisation's life cycle is the first thing to consider: whether it is newly founded, at the mid-life stage or in decline. Different prescriptions are offered to leaders who want to change and manage an organisation's culture at each stage. The key mechanisms for mid-life organisations are: promotion from selected sub-cultures, technological seduction and infusion of outsiders. Leaders can continue to evolve the culture to build on from the earlier stage by promoting learning and other incremental change mechanisms. Schein's (2010, p. 273) framework, which identifies different stages in the life cycle of individual organisations, is used to underpin the detailed analysis that follows.

3. Research methods and case study organisations

Previous to this research, attempts to consider the use of KM in UK charities had relied on surveys. The results established that KM was widely known in the sector, and respondents could describe activities being implemented within their organisations (Hovland, 2003;

Ramalingam, 2004). For this study, it was necessary to go beyond surveys by investigating real case studies, because: "The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context" (Yin, 1993, p. 3). Many KM case studies have been documented, but the literature is strongly biased towards commercial examples, thus leaving untested sectoral differences (for example: Jennex, 2005).

In this research project, three case studies in international development charities were undertaken, including an element of longitudinal research to ensure that the programmes were lasting, rather than short-lived deviations from business as usual (Corfield, 2011). This longitudinal aspect was particularly valuable, where culture change is not expected to be a short-term activity. It avoids the hazard that some apparent changes are rhetorical only, for example, to please donors, rather than to make any real impact on the organisation. The opportunity to see if changes became embedded was accordingly incorporated into the study format.

Each charity studied here is viewed through the lens of Schein's three organisational stages. One had been set up by a charismatic leader; the other two were faith-based organisations. However, by the time of the study, while their official documentation referenced their founders and founding rationales, all these organisations had grown into mature institutions, with governance now typical of the standard for the sector. Hence, they can be classified as mid-life organisations.

They were medium sized, being neither small specialised charities nor major international players. Each had a head office in the UK, but with employees in multiple countries. This state of affairs meant that the research needed to include consideration of non-UK bases. For the remainder of this article, the charities are called Charity A (smaller faith charity), Charity B (secular knowledge product charity) and Charity C (larger faith charity). Quotations from staff interviews are used to illustrate the analysis, and each one is identified by the charity code and the number of the interviewee. These are listed, together with a research schedule, in the Appendix at the end of the article.

The research study was set up to identify where KM was working successfully and consider the factors that contributed to that success in the three charities. Between 2004 and 2007, the main research was carried out at their organisational headquarters. It involved conducting ten interviews in each charity with KM personnel and with staff who were participating in KM activities. There were also observation sessions, including visits to celebrations, trainings and KM presentations to staff, which were annotated to highlight aspects of the internal environment and relationships that were manifest. The research also included study of relevant documentation, such as statements of the organisation's strategy and values and documents establishing the KM rationale and programme.

The main research tool was the interview, where a set of ten open-ended questions were used. These questions allowed respondents to give their views about factors that supported KM. Inevitably, the answers produced considerable information about the respondents' views on organisational culture, although the first questions did not prompt this specific focus. There was also one direct question about the relationship of organisational culture with KM (Question 8) in the structured interview. This question directly asked for further information, specifically relating organisational culture to the KM programmes. The interviews lasted one hour, but were often extended, as the interviewees were very open and eager to talk about their experiences. All the replies were transcribed and collated to allow formal analysis of the data, and this was related to different factors potentially affecting KM.

For the factor "organisational culture", answers were classified as spontaneous comments on culture or in response to the specific prompting of Question 8, and analysed to draw out insights into how interviewees perceived the relationship of culture with KM. The frequency of this focus was also identified. The interview analysis was then compared with information

from documentation and observation. As this was qualitative research, the case study methodology was based on the classic work of Yin (1994), and was designed to match the rigorous case study validity criteria set out in his seminal work.

Follow-up continued until 2010. By regular return visits to each charity, it could be checked to see whether each programme was sustained throughout organisational change and staff turnover. Visits were also made to offices beyond the UK headquarters, thus involving a wider range of perspectives on the KM programme. This mechanism allowed the researcher to consider international cultural issues in offices far from UK headquarters.

4. Findings

4.1 The insiders' view of culture

This article has posed the question:

Q1. Do organisations have distinctive cultures, and if so, are these linked to their sector?

An important initial observation was that no charity had carried out any type of formal cultural assessment, and so there was no established recognition of the dominant contemporary cultural forms. Instead, people spoke from their personal experience, and presented a picture that the three case study charities were mid-life organisations with complex cultures that were not highly differentiated from other contemporary organisations, despite their different histories.

Analysis of the data provided specific insights into what international development charity workers understand by "organisational culture". It was clear from interview responses that staff in each charity understood the concept and believed it was relevant to their organisation. Some people, particularly if they were newly employed by the charity, spoke of culture as if it was something that applied to the organisation but not to them. For example: "there is a calm and peaceful feel to Charity A but actually it is a very intense place to work" (A9). Similarly, there is this generalisation from Charity C: "People are well meaning but they find loads of reasons for not doing things" (C4). From these examples, it can be concluded that culture can be experienced as independent of the people working in the organisation.

"NPOs (Non Profit Organisations) seem to be influenced by the ethical or cultural way of thinking of the particular historical - social contact in which they were created and operate. These roots influence the knowledge management process" (Lettieri *et al.*, 2004, p. 29). It could not be said that this feature was demonstrated in the study data for these three charities. There was no suggestion of a simple dominant cultural influence and only rare references to their roots or founders.

Staff in each charity believed that there were significant sub-cultures, which affect the way people work together. Quotations included:

I think that culture is there but whether it is in all teams, I think varies (A5).

Because internationally each office has its own culture and they do things differently (B4).

There are problems of different cultures in different localities (C10).

The question of whether the culture in these organisations could be differentiated from other sectors was raised by interview participants. One indication of cultural hostility to commercial norms can be quoted: "we have business now in job titles. It jars and feels uncomfortable in this set up [. . .] It is the part I am not so happy about" (C5).

However, this sentiment was unique among all the statements made. There were a large number of interview participants who stated that they had worked both in the public and private sectors earlier in their careers. The majority directly rejected a view of hostility to commercial practice: "it is better than five years ago. People then were reluctant to use technology, as it was 'too corporate'. They didn't want to embrace the corporate world even

if there are good ways to do things" (C6). The regular movement of the workforce between this sector and the commercial and public sectors suggested that major cultural differences were unlikely to predominate.

It can be expected that there will be some diversity between different sectors: "it can be seen that organisational populations will never become the same. That will never be the case simply because they undertake very different tasks requiring very different organisational settings" (Paton, 2003, p. 34). Cultural differences relating to sector were not pronounced, however, in the views of the staff members interviewed. The lack of any consistent comments on barriers to KM in these international development charities means there is no evidence to conclude that their culture was intrinsically inimical to commercial management practices, such as KM.

A common theme for all three charities was of constant change: "One frustration is how much change is going on. There are so many things happening at once" (C1). In this situation, people need to feel sure that they are allowed to spend time on overcoming the difficulties associated with doing things differently. Where there is a conflict of interest, or some ambiguity about priorities, culture can be expected to restore habitual activity and traditional ways of doing things, unless a strong enough consensus enables them to change.

To summarise, in response to the first question posed in this article (Do organisations have distinctive cultures, and if so, are these linked to their sector?), the case studies confirmed the concept of an organisational culture and people's willingness to comment on it. They do not allow simplified generalisations about these organisations' cultures. The evidence does not appear to support the view that these charities had cultures very different from those of other sectors. It does confirm the complexity of culture, in that it can vary within one organisation and that culture will evolve with changes both within and external to the charity itself. The consensus among interview participants suggests that they believed culture is an important issue for KM programmes, but that it is highly complex and not something easily described or categorised.

4.2 KM leading change: enhancing knowledge sharing

The next sections consider the second and third questions posed at the start of this article (Can KM programmes play a role in culture change in the voluntary sector? What approaches best support KM as a successful agent of cultural change?)

From each charity, the idea was presented that KM should or would "change culture". However, with no cultural assessment made, there was no baseline for planning change. There was some evidence that this lack of clarity held back the KM programmes, for example: "They still talk about the need for culture change. In some respect they don't know corporately what this should look like. We all have individual views" (C9).

Schein makes clear that it is likely to be more appropriate to look for cultural alignments, and use these to bring positive change, rather than to assume that the culture has to be altered. He writes: "one of the biggest mistakes that leaders make when they undertake change initiatives is to [. . .] assume that culture change would be needed" (Schein, 2010, p. 317). It is likely that challenging underlying assumptions will cause anxiety and conflict, and so there would have to be powerful reasons to undertake it. Anyone genuinely changing culture would have to be clear where old ways that had worked successfully in the past had become inappropriate, and were now required to be unlearned. This perspective casts an interesting light on the three charities' stated intention to change culture to increase "knowledge sharing".

The problem situation had been identified by the leadership and the KM teams: that there was resistance to cross-organisational sharing. Where there are formal hierarchies, work "silos" – internal-facing sub-groups – may dominate an organisation, so that people have little awareness or interest in the work of other groups. This factor was widely considered

to be a problem in all three charities. It was deemed that the culture needed changing as is suggested in the following quotations:

- "Not just how we become more effective managers of an organisation, but how do we learn between programmes, between teams, between partners" (A4).

- "There is a tendency not to work outside your own space. You work with close colleagues and cross communication doesn't seem to happen" (B2).

- "We began to feel the pain of being a disjointed organisation. We saw the need to work more as one" (C9).

This concern provided the basis for focusing on culture change. However, it was not clear why this was so firmly asserted, when there was also evidence that sharing was already an integral part of the culture.

KM was identified as matching well with the organisations' stated values, as shown by the following quotation: "One of our core values is in terms of the whole issue of relationships; how we work together; how we learn from each other. We want to work in partnership, with mutual respect on both sides" (A7). Values such as these suggest that knowledge will be more easily accepted as an organisation flow, moving to where it is needed, rather than being seen as a personal commodity, to be hoarded for personal power. Absence of negative comments was also noticeable – no interview respondent suggested that the KM programmes in total were inimical to the current, or to an improved, organisational culture. For example, one interview participant commented: "Cultural change still needs to happen. However, this answer is a 'yes and no' because there is lots of resistance but when they do engage there is no stopping them" (C1).

This statement does not imply that there is a deep-seated cultural conflict related to knowledge sharing, but rather that some barriers cause behaviour to deviate from their preferred norms. To this extent, KM could be viewed as a technique to help remove barriers that were impeding a naturally sharing culture. KM programmes were accordingly designed to increase sharing by opening communication channels to allow knowledge sharing and innovation through cross-fertilisation of knowledge.

The idea of changing culture was widely talked about, but there was little clarity about how this was to be achieved. In Charity B, the role of the knowledge manager is described as: "my job description says I am meant to help culture change" (B1). Her sense of confusion is conveyed by a further comment describing the response of an "Action Learning Set", when told that the KM job was to change culture: "[*They*] asked how this was meant to be done!" This comment was made in a tone of heavy sarcasm, which implied that the answer had not been revealed to her. Others in the charity echoed her confusion with the following lament, which also highlights the gulf between leadership and the rest of the workforce: "They expect it to just happen" (B2).

The common difficulties seen in all three charities can be illustrated by the KM programmes in Charity B. Despite enthusiastic endorsement from the CEO, support was not consistent or sustained. A staff member stated: "And also perhaps a clearer organisational direction on what knowledge we are trying to manage and what we should do with it and the priority for it, so that it feeds down" (B6). The CEO also recognised this problem, stating: "although we have senior management buy-in, but the people chosen were low down the pecking order and these people did not feel empowered to change the culture and our way of working" (B3).

Another example of the lack of focus in changing culture through KM was noted. The KM programme was intent on setting up cross-departmental workgroups and CoP to counter the "non-sharing culture". Yet at a celebratory lunch observed by the researcher, many staff commented that the recent closure of the canteen had reduced the opportunities in headquarters to communicate across the separate locations of departments. The shared eating space had been cut as a savings measure, despite widespread belief that it had a

proven networking value. The CoPs had already faded, during the time of the study, and served as an example of the *ad hoc* nature of the approach to KM-led culture change in Charity B. This unfocused approach was typical of the three charities' ideas about building a knowledge-sharing organisation. However, both the other two charities did offer some more successful stories.

4.3 KM leading culture change: learning organisation

If a generalised intention to change culture was not sufficient in the example of knowledge sharing, then it is instructive to look at Charity A, where one aspect of their KM programme was widely judged to have been successful.

There was a belief in Charity A that their approach to work was far too focused on action and too little on reflection. The pressing nature of the problems they faced and the desire to make a rapid impact meant that learning from previous activity was neglected. In the words on one interviewee: "People don't really want to take time to review" (A9). Learning from knowledge acquired from previous experience became an avowed goal of the organisation, and the KM programme, therefore, was focused on culture change – to develop a "learning culture".

The evidence for leadership support for KM at senior level came out explicitly from interview responses, for example: "The General Director quickly spotted the value or importance of this" (A3); and "It is a concept that has come from the top of the organisation [. . .] it has been modelled by our leadership, so it all makes sense" (A7). The KM team were backed strongly by senior leaders who not only supported change, but also slowly began to model it themselves. One person emphasised: "there was leadership from the Board and buy-in lower down so that people do prioritise learning. They can be told about the long-term value" (A6).

Accordingly, the KM programme focused on increasing the use of the technique called "learning reviews", so that knowledge would be given much higher prominence in the formal and "lived" values of the organisation. But the tool was not used in isolation. It was combined with complementary KM programmes to bring about more appropriate understanding of the nature of data, information and knowledge, and also a better recognition of the value of knowledge assets. Technology systems were also enhanced to allow staff easier access to a "Lessons Learned" database. In one follow-up session, it was noted that the CEO was role modelling the learning review technique and checking that senior managers also gave more than lip service to their support.

At the same time, strenuous efforts were made to use local "champions" to push forward KM ideas in local teams, as it was seen that formal leadership alone would not be enough. This emphasis acknowledges that organisational culture may be amenable to top down initiatives, but a wider base of support allows influence to work through informal channels as well.

This use of champions for change can be associated with one of the three techniques that Schein (2010, p. 283) advocates for leading culture change. Staff with aptitude for the desired behaviour, from a chosen sub-culture, were promoted to a champion role (with appropriate prestige, although there was no pay rise), with the intention of raising the profile of the KM work and so increasing the influence on organisational culture.

This approach was given a consistent focus over the years of the study. From tiny steps – from pilot learning reviews in 2004 through to an observation session in 2008 where champions were given a training day, and beyond – this incremental approach has been a major part of the KM focus. As culture includes habitual behaviours and approaches, this steady focus would appear to be appropriate.

In another interview at Charity A, there is an interesting insight into this focus on changing culture. As the interview began, the participant was initially negative about the KM

programme, but slowly changed this view: "firstly, getting people to stop before they do the next activity because we are so activity-focused, which I think is the nature of the organisation. We are activists, we do like people to do things, and so getting people to stop is a success in itself" (A5). The interviewee then spoke of the value of new terminology that enables staff to discuss knowledge and learning issues in a way that had not been possible before, and which contrasted positively with his experience at previous workplaces. This interesting exchange highlights not only the success of the KM work in Charity A, but also the difficulty and limitations of cultural change within a relatively short timeframe.

It was not a programme that was accurately costed, as activity took place across all teams, often without formal identification. The fact that the leadership team still prioritises learning reviews today indicates that the key decision-makers are far from dissatisfied with the outcomes of this process and the impact it has on the organisational culture. One person in Charity A gave a positive assessment: "So the fact that it's now pretty much in the culture of the organisation has got to be a good thing" (A2).

4.4 "Technology seduction" to enable culture change

Another technique suggested by Schein (2010, p. 284) is what he calls technology seduction. This can be illustrated by the KM programme in Charity C. New technology was explicitly seen as a change agent, as the Knowledge Manager said: "The technical platform leads the cultural change" (C1). In this case, the change was intended to bring actual behaviour closer in line with their basic assumption: that the charity should put the requirements of its recipients as the central focus in decision-making. At the time of the study, Charity C wanted to alter the way that decisions were made to include much wider participation from offices in all their far flung locations.

Most importantly, the technology was not expected to change the organisation without a solid focus on its interface with the people using it. A wide-ranging campaign to project the implications of the new way of working was initiated, and training was delivered through central programmes as well as local champions who could cater for differences in local cultures.

The project was cross-organisational and praised by project participants and those who subsequently used the product. A staff member from the technology team said: "It was one of the best collaborations because it was not seen as a business project, nor was it seen as an IT project. It was seen as an organisational priority" (C2). Leadership in the charity was less actively involved in support in comparison to Charity A, but it was commented: "The corporate directors have kept faith" (C8).

It is worth noting here that within KM theory, a dichotomy of culture and technology is often invoked. However: "the cultural dimension encompasses technology and implicitly rejects the dualism of much current knowledge management [. . .]. The distinction was useful for a period to drag people away from thinking that knowledge management could be achieved solely through the procurement of technology. However, it now disguises a vital aspect of any human culture; we are first and foremost a tool-making and tool-using animal. Our culture makes little sense without taking information technology, the latest manifestation of our tool-making ability, into account" (Snowdon, 2000, p. 240). The focus on technology in Charity C was appropriate as a culture change agent, given technology's central role in the contemporary workplace. If the new software was used successfully, then it would be a part of almost every staff member's daily routine. The need to embed the new software was explicit and appropriate: "there has been training as there is a culture issue. People have to understand, believe, and bother. If you are part of a small group and you all know one another, why would you want to share? You need a culture across the organisation that sees, understands and benefits from it" (C2).

Prolonged observation during the course of the study suggested that the new technology had indeed become embedded, and was widely in use at the end of the study period, both in the

UK and in the African office that was visited. Once again, there were no accurate figures to provide an evaluation of the return on capital, as the costs were not simply incurred for the new technology. The large financial investment was also matched by the costs of time for the customised training and learning from a huge range of staff across the organisation.

Cultural change is a long-term activity which takes time to unfold. However, within the span of these observations, there were signs that the project had impacted positively. As one person, who was not the part of the implementation team, suggested: "I can see specific areas where the project has contributed if you are thinking about our silo mentality. If you work in the Marketing Team, that is where you work and there are still not really any linkages. The knowledge management project has behaviour and tools to encourage people to stop these limitations. I think this is good" (C9). These changes were interpreted as transformative: "So I think there has been a culture change and I suspect throughout the organisation that change has had variable effects" (C7). This comment is a reminder that a global organisational culture change was profoundly complicated, given the financial limits, the technology variations and the variety of cultures acknowledged within each charity.

Interview participants suggested that some of this variety of outcome was due to practical constraints. There was concern about how much change would affect some staff in Africa, where enthusiasm for new technology providing new ways of working would be challenged by poor local infrastructure. "There are problems to do with connectivity. These are issues outside our control. Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo have huge issues. You can throw more money at it but there is still no regular power so this does not apply. Most cannot access the intranet and if they do it is very slow" (C5). This problem still has a serious impact on the growth of a more global work culture. It highlights the resource disparity between the voluntary sector and the commercial organisations with similar global reach where these tools have been initiated by KM specialists. One poignant comment was made: "But there are now cost cuts so you have a fantastic [intranet and document sharing] site with not enough resources" (C7).

Despite these problems, in countries around the world where IT infrastructure was in place, which included most of the charity's offices, it can be argued that a new way of working was becoming the new norm. International information and opinion had become as easy to access as central UK knowledge, with the availability of stored documentation and instant cross-organisational communication facilitated. This ability to speak and share across the globe could be seen as the start of a major change. Perhaps it was less a fundamental culture change at the deepest level, but the charity had begun to put in place mechanisms that would give more weight to empowering their charity recipients, rather than simply providing for them, in a development that took it beyond its founding mission. In Charity C, this KM programme had the potential to bring observed behaviour closer to these new espoused values.

The final sections above have looked at the second and third questions posed at the start of this article: (Can KM programmes play a role in culture change in the voluntary sector? What approaches best support KM as a successful agent of cultural change?) to identify examples where culture change was intended as one outcome of KM programmes and to consider the approaches they illustrated.

5. Conclusions

From this study, it can be seen that the KM programmes included short-term changes that may be easy to accomplish. CoPs were set up, sharing systems put in place, successful learning reviews completed and their conclusions reused later by other teams. But while these have value at the time, they are only relevant to organisational culture if they embed new ways of working. Some of the KM initiatives did not meet this test, and the KM programmes, ostensibly intended to change culture, were based on incoherent views about the prevailing situation.

But the power of persistent leadership, using a variety of methods to promote appropriate behaviours, together with the understanding of the values and assumptions underpinning these, did bring change. So also did the use of well-implemented technology that meets users' daily needs. Together with encouraging champions to promote changed patterns of work practice across an organisation, they provide evidence that KM interventions can lead to changes that effectively link to individual and group work routines. These can be labelled "culture change" in the sense that they were premised on embedding new ways of working. The study draws out six implications for KM managers and organisation leaders who plan to use KM as a culture change agent:

1. Leaders can use KM programmes and tools to promote a specific culture change, but this requires dogged persistence as well as the use of a wide variety of tools and approaches, backed by a clear and sustained rationale.

2. Promoting and supporting people who have the right attitudes and aptitude to act as champions across the organisation is a recommended way to encourage local penetration.

3. "Technology seduction" can support culture adaptation, but again, this approach will not work in isolation and must be accompanied by training and related activity to ensure that people can absorb the new behaviours into everyday work practices.

4. KM programmes can be presented as conforming to simplistic notions of culture change. Removing barriers to improved performance is valuable, but does not alter the long-term assumptions, approaches and norms that constitute organisational culture.

5. If the organisational culture is identified as needing to be changed, then a formal assessment of what that cultural aspect is and why it is no longer appropriate can be used.

6. The use of short-term activities and exhortation to alter deep-seated values and assumptions is not recommended.

Schein notes that culture change can focus on two aspects – internal integration and external adaptation. This duality provides an interesting lens to consider further these emergent findings.

5.1 Internal integration

The intricacy of culture within a mature organisation does make KM a suitable channel to lead change where specific adaptation is desired. It is designed to work across hierarchical structures in a cross-organisational way, and so can provide programmes which can engage different sub-cultures in a thoughtful and consciously aware manner. However, in this specific organisational population, the suggestion that KM will change cultures to something "better" raises ethical questions. Changing the organisational culture could conflict with the obligation to respect local cultures, such an obligation being embodied in the charities' values.

One suspicion is that the dominant culture will be found in the UK headquarters, and then assumed to be the "best" or at least the most practical. It was an indication of the difficulty that was faced by the KM teams that none of the charities demonstrated any serious focus on the challenge of working with populations using different languages. Despite the awareness that their cultures were not at all homogeneous, there was no recognition that cultural variety might form a positive aspect of their KM programmes. There was no suggestion that Schein's (2010, p. 284) view that "diversity increases adaptive capacity" was understood.

Customisation and local participation which allows people time to absorb changes into their view of how things should be and, most importantly, how it would enable their own work to be delivered more effectively, is the key to attempting to bring about cross-organisational culture change to produce a more integrated global work culture. This requirement means that organisations need to take time to assess strengths and weaknesses in the many varieties of cultures found within. Unless that point is taken into account, there is a clear risk that KM

schemes will be insensitively applied in a top-down manner, thus tempting staff to ignore or bypass them.

A second issue was to look at contradictions between espoused values and more mundane practicalities. Despite the protestations that KM was needed to change culture by reducing "silo" working, in practice there may have been stronger pressures to maintain the current hierarchical power bases. A comment was made: "they say it is important and worth investing in, but [. . .] " (B4). The rhetoric was stronger than the practical support for the KM teams, when structural change was required.

These observations suggest that KM does not only have the apparently bland intention of "changing culture", but, to be successful, will fundamentally change power relationships. The "silos" that many people viewed as a problem for knowledge sharing are the domains of senior managers, who have built up their power and who expect the loyalty of their subordinates. The empowerment of knowledge workers is not necessarily going to be easy to assimilate. Culture change involving redistributing power may involve hidden agendas that complicate knowledge-sharing schemes.

As an example, efforts to use technology to find new ways to bring the voices of the poor directly to influential western audiences may be identified strongly with espoused values, but some caution may exist at this loss of the organisation's own power to mediate those voices. More mundanely, some barriers to sharing may be due to local comfort zones or, indeed, practical reasons such as to reduce information overload.

Charity leaders espouse altruistic motivations and, while hoping to help poor people in the short term, must be aware of long-term consequences for the recipients and the rest of the world. But individuals will also be concerned about their own careers and relative remuneration. Charities based in the UK will by default carry with them many of the trappings of the contemporary culture of the rich western world, as no organisation is isolated from its own economic and cultural realities. These considerations help to explain why blocks to knowledge sharing continue to be challenges, despite elements of the KM programmes achieving success. KM is a part of the political realities of organisational life as much as any other aspect.

5.2 External pressures

Highly noticeable in the interviews with KM specialists and participants was a lack of discussion of issues arising from external pressures that are constantly shifting and influencing the evolving internal culture. The dominant political and business management pressure in the UK has been for more "business-like" ethos and behaviour. The introduction of systems of annual management bonuses and individual performance-related pay are percolating through the voluntary sector, and this change can encourage short-term and individual motivations to move to the fore. These concerns may not match well with long-term programmes of KM and culture change.

It can be suggested that as charities promote an influx of workers from the commercial sector to show their business-friendly culture, this will act as the third of Schein's (2010, p. 287) methods for achieving culture change; "infusion of outsiders". By making intentional selection choices that promote people who have worked in commercial organisations, differences of cultures across sectors will be consciously reduced. If it is accepted that private, public and voluntary organisations start from different basic beliefs based on their origins, and their different functions, then this trend may provide more fundamental culture change than the internally based efforts of the KM teams. Yet although it was recognised that there was a change in attitudes to commercial practices, there was little acknowledgement that external pressures were also a factor is evolving cultural change.

This study provided case study data to illuminate the KM activity of some chosen voluntary sector organisations, looking internally at their intention to change culture. Schein's second strand of culture change, external adaptation, points to a need for more research into KM's

potential impact on organisational culture in the UK voluntary sector to investigate how its contribution integrates or conflicts with the rapidly changing external environment.

5.3 Summary

This article has described the outcomes of three case studies that investigated the relationship between KM and organisational culture. It found that KM does indeed affect culture. But the relationships are always complex. Where leaders plan to use KM for culture change, there has to be an understanding of these complexities and a commitment to using a variety of complementary activities over a sustained period of time. Nothing in the study identifies cultural change as a factor of organisational life that stands alone. Culture is intricate and amorphous. It does not make sense to try to manipulate it directly for its own sake. For staff in any organisation, simply being exhorted to transform "the organisational culture" is likely to lead to cosmetic changes on the surface, rather than to any worthwhile new behaviours. Instead, work programmes that integrate well with daily routines and which enable new ways of working to become embedded are the key to making internal cultural changes that last.

The study was necessarily limited to one organisational group – international development charities. The results, therefore, have to be considered in that context, and can only be applied to other fields where there are commonalities of context. Hence, it is always wise to realise that there is no one "magic" solution which can be applied in all variant circumstances. Nonetheless, as currently the voluntary sector is under pressure to move much closer to common working practices within business and public organisations, there are clearly some overlaps.

Finally, it is essential to note that all organisations are working with, and adapting to, a high-pressure external environment with potentially transformative new knowledge-handling technology becoming regularly available. That situation is unlikely to change. So there certainly remains room for further research to consider the twin challenges, identified by Schein: internal change and external adaptation. How organisations adapt, or fail to adapt, make for perennially interesting questions, whose answers have important practical implications. In the meantime, the findings analysed here have a wider resonance, if applied with appropriate sensitivity to the local context. The continuation of rapid change makes the challenge of understanding the intricate relationships between KM and organisational culture all the more essential.

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Appendix

Table AI	Table of interview subjects and research schedules
Interview subjects plus codes	
Charity A	
A1	Knowledge Manager
A2	Learning Officer
A3	Senior Manager
A4	Head of Overseas Operations
A5	Evaluations Officer
A6	Support Manager
A7	Communications Manager
A8	Head of Finance
A9	Head of HR
A10	Head of IT
Charity B	
B1	Knowledge Manager
B2	Image Librarian
B3	CEO
B4	Senior Manager
B5	Research Officer
B6	Operations Officer
B7	Communications Manager
B8	Web Manager
B9	Quality Administrator
B10	Head of IT
Charity C	
C1	Knowledge Manager
C2	KM–IT Liaison
C3	Senior Manager
C4	Overseas Manager
C5	Overseas Administrator
C6	Knowledge Champion
C7	Communications Officer
C8	Head of Finance
C9	Head of HR
C10	Head of IT

Schedule of visits

Charity A		
Original case study	December 2004	
Follow-up visit	November 2006	Discussion with Knowledge Manager
Survey and visit	April 2007	Facilitators observation and staff survey
Follow-up discussions	July 2007	Interview with Knowledge Manager and Trainer
Follow-up visit	March 2009	Discussion with Knowledge Manager
Follow-up visit	March 2010	Discussion with Knowledge Manager
Charity B		
Original case study	July 2005	
Follow-up visit	August 2005	Presented report
Visit to Peru office	January 2006	Interviewed Director and three local staff
Follow-up discussion	June 2006	Discussion with Knowledge Manager and Head of IT
Follow-up visit	November 2008	Discussion with new Knowledge Manager
Follow-up visit	February 2010	Discussion with Knowledge Manager
Visit to Nairobi	March 2010	Interview with staff in local office
Charity C		
Original case study begun	November 2006	
Case study completed	March 2007	
Follow-up call	June 2007	Discussion with Knowledge Manager
Follow-up visit	July 2009	Discussion with Head of IT
Follow-up visit	February 2009	Knowledge/Communication Managers
Visit to Nairobi	March 2010	Interviews with staff in local office