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Understanding dignity at the face of changing world of work

Authors

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Abstract

Globally, a set of serious questions have resurfaced, which were earlier confronted at the dawn of industrialisation- Powerful machines are taking away jobs from humans. While mechanisation was the reason in the 18th Century, today, the imminent ‘threat’ is being posed by robotics. The World Development Report (2019) which speaks of “The changing nature of work” explicitly reiterates that in future, what would be needed is “a combination of technological know-how, problem-solving, and critical thinking as well as soft skills such as perseverance, collaboration, and empathy... In the gig economy... they will have to be lifelong learners.” This also brings us to think of the pace with which new knowledge needs to be usurped by organisations of today and tomorrow.

We iterate that the key facilitator to stay abreast with the market can be the engagement with knowledge of each individual actor. It is elementary that substantial human capital related investments are to be made to strengthen and build the existing knowledge resources to be able to appropriate such changes posed by environment. In order to understand a sustainable structure which organically builds and engages though knowledge, we looked for inspiration in some existing organizational practices. A set of narratives were primarily compiled and analysed through a multiple case study approach to understand the relevance of Knowledge and engagement across diverse formats of organisations with the aim to learn the drivers and processes that promoted engagement. In the course of discussion of the cases, the value stance of “dignity” emerged as a key factor and a potential theory was derived. We report the preliminary analysis from the pilot inquiry here.

Prologue

It is often times considered that an organisation is gifted with an instinct for self-preservation, similar to a living being, which balances the risk inherent in the instinct towards expansion; it possesses an information dissemination scheme and a flow of materials and energy governed by a veritable metabolic system. The theorists over the years attempted to decipher this system, its mechanisms and structures under multiple lenses triggered by their favourite stream of study. Some chosen school of thoughts among them are taken up hereunder.

Earlier, the human behaviour school demonstrated the consequence of pleasant labour setting on productivity and the significance of informal organisation, thereby marking the formal entry of social sciences into the organisation's parlance. Following the important work of March and Simon (1958), the psychological apparatus of actors seems to be animated above all by the cognitive, perceptual and decision-making processes which form the principal link between man and his work, between the 'psychological' and 'physiological', between individual desires and the execution of a task." (Lussato, 1976). In order to engage such a plethora of thoughts within the limited space and time that the organisation allows, and to bring in creative thought processes in its actors, an inspiring value or an elevated platform which facilitates thinking may be necessary. Literature imbibed the concepts of bounded rationality and intended rationality, in this attempt.

Looking unto knowledge as an able thesis empowered to transform its immediate environment and the constituent actors, can organisations chart engagement within the premise of knowledge. Conversations on knowledge are as old as the tiff between empiricism and rationalism; which later imbibed questions on structure and economics. In economics, scholars like Adam Smith spoke of workers learning from experience, Alfred Marshall touched upon knowledge as a productive resource and Kenneth Arrow coined the term "Learning by doing". On the other hand, in the field of management, knowledge was integrated by Peter Drucker who coined "knowledge worker" (1959). However, it was only in the 1990's that knowledge evolved itself as an important topic with Thomas A. Stewart noting knowledge management alongside intellectual capital. Also during this time Nonaka-Takeuchi (1995), published their seminal work which proposed a theory of organisational knowledge creation.

The nature, constitution, form and structure of organisations evolved over time. Some key questions progressed from "what is organisation?", "what are its functions" to "assets that form an organisation" and reached a stage of "why organisation". In a summary Wren, D. A. and Bedeian A. (2009) observed that "the development of a body of knowledge about how to manage has... evolved within the framework of the economic, social and political facets of various cultures".

Within the several terms of reference of organizations lay the numerous complexities that represent its structure and the absence of a unitary platform to contain its divergence. It is in this context that the potential of knowledge as a master-integrator and engager of diverse organisational thoughts is being explored. In a nutshell, it may be believed that knowledge as a resource cannot be understood and imbibed in its full grandeur unless it interacts with the human beings who create and enrich it. The study explores multiple structures through the lens of knowledge, and learns how practices translate into engagement. The analysis from the pilot study is presented here.

Objectives of the study

The pilot study had the following objectives

1. Explore cases of multiple organisational environments with diverse background, history, composition and structure to learn their systems of engagement
2. Understand the prevalence of knowledge within these structures and explore the processes followed to engage actors through knowledge
3. Analyse the dyadic relationship between knowledge and engagement, engagement and structure, or any other drivers so emerged during the course of the study

Methodology

With the support of cases picked from three unique contexts- Private, Public, Cooperative sector organisations- the study attempted to understand the linkages among themes Knowledge, Engagement and Structures. The study employed a Multiple Case Study method to unravel operational links of subject over time. Triangulation of data has been systematically performed by evidencing and validating through interviews, organisational reports, media releases, and research studies on the organisations. The study aims to bring to light the multiple realities in organisations and delve deep into the pattern of relationship between different themes of study. It learns the impact of history, philosophies and embeddedness of behaviour in culture.

Each of the three organisations under analysis has been in existence for at least 40 years and has also travelled past the Globalisation that India experienced. They bring in understanding on challenges and insights which have parallels with the Indian history of management, trade and international exchanges. One of the cases is an enterprise that has remarkable global footprint and the only Government owned enterprise in its fraternity, the other is a home-grown enterprise which pioneered outsourcing and withstood massive worker agitation to become profitable in no time and the third organisation is a worker owned cooperative which in contemporary dialectics may not be considered profitable but have ensured consistent profits throughout their years of existence through systematic efforts into modernising while keeping their original fervour intact.

The Primary data was collected by way of in-depth interviews within the original organisational space albeit within separate discussion rooms. The Secondary data was derived from the Annual Reports, Internal Newsletters, Silver/ Golden Jubilee Souvenirs, Magazines issued by the organisation, Press Releases, Media archives etc.

Concept Map

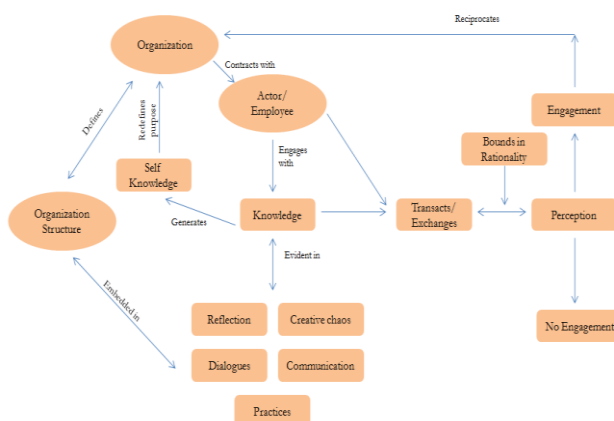


Diagram: 1 – Conceptual map derived from the Review of Literature

Case Design: Theory Building from Cases

During the analysis, it was hoped that a set of relationships on the key themes can potentially emerge as a natural outcome. This when observed closely pointed in the direction of a plausible theory too. Further the strength and merit of approach was revealed by the seminal paper of Eisenhardt and Graebner by the title “Theory building from cases: Opportunities and Challenges” (2007). Building theory from case studies involves using cases to “create theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based, empirical evidence” (Eisenhardt, 1989b). It was interesting to understand one of the ways in which multiple cases can be treated without losing the impact of empirically rich data. It is also meaningful to note that theory building serves as a well formed bridge from robust qualitative substantiation to deductive reasoning. Since it is a theory-building approach that is deeply embedded in rich empirical data, building theory from cases is likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting, and testable. Thus, it is a natural complement to mainstream deductive research.

Each component was analysed with the help of both primary and secondary information derived during the study as well as the primers which emerged during its interpretation. If to place in a schema and look at how these themes may be complimenting the efforts of one another, the following relationship can be looked at.



	Structure	Engagement	Knowledge	Dignity
Structure	X	High	Low	Medium
Engagement	High	X	High	Medium
Knowledge	Low	High	X	Medium
Dignity	Medium	Medium	Medium	X

Diagram: 2 – Dyadic relationship between themes

Here three paradigms were used to analyse the relationship between themes in terms of their relevance – High, Medium and Low. High relevance means extremely high dependency on each other when considering the dyadic relationship, Medium relevance means mediocre association and familiarity in one theme influencing the other and Low relevance would mean a comparatively ignorable relationship between the identified themes. It is important to understand that the themes are extremely interlinked and separating them to look at each independently was an arduous task. Nevertheless, the relevance of each became quite self-revelatory during the interpretation and the chapter explains how each of the premises was arrived at. As explained in the extant literature, the relation between Structure and Engagement as well as Engagement and Knowledge was well established. If they became the upper layer of analysis, the emergent determinant “dignity” surely succeeds in becoming

the next layer. It simply doesn't remain as an isolated phenomenon but closely connects to Structure, Engagement and Knowledge equally. Its relevance is yet to be explored in its full glory as more or less these components stand tall and has been subjected to substantial scholastic inquiry previously. However the presence of dignity cannot be ignored as it has revealed itself to be a critical component which relates to reach of the themes well. Now the issue is how to test if this dignity is as important as it appears.

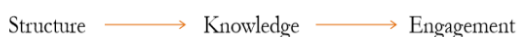
One important way to do that would be to see if the theme holds good across all the cases and all the empirical evidences. It is to be noted that not only each context reveals dignity but also each context has its own explanation of what constitutes dignified workplace practices and well-being. Each of these definitions again reflects itself in the structural peculiarities along with knowledge and engagement scenarios. So it nourishes a cyclical scheme of things and hence we can safely come up with a premise that, dignity makes the relationship between these variables cyclical. The linearity of the relationship between the themes engagement, structure and knowledge soon becomes cyclical as they start complementing one another in the presence of dignity. This complete cycle is not just a determinant of engagement, but also is a valuable indication of robust structure and knowledge practices.

It opens one to think of a culture of reciprocation which can potentially lead to the creation of organisation structures that can stand the test of time. When practices and policies are formed on strong grounds of moral vanguard, reciprocation can be the outcome. This reciprocation would then lead to an appreciating culture, wherein every skill is appreciated and imbibed. This would also mean that even the nuances of fresh knowledge would be absorbed effectively. So when such opportunities are opened, the actors would naturally sense dignity in its very structure and practices. This would ultimately lead to long term sustenance of the structure as an outcome of engagement.

The theory can hence be put to test thus: **If dignity is the primer or the pre-condition to an engaging work place, then knowledge practices would necessarily be well evolved and accepted. If structure leads to knowledge creation and dissemination, then the engagement so created may be owing to effective evaluation of dignifying practices within the system.**

The following interpretation would act as the differentiating factor of the theory from the erstwhile explained literature.

- Extant Literature



- Current Theoretical Derivation

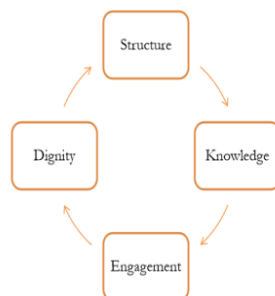


Diagram: 3 – Theoretical Derivation

Conclusion

The human mind largely depends on cues drawn from their day to day transactions and often they are embedded in seemingly impressive instances of organisational conduct of actors. Acknowledging such judgements, the scope for intervention of an organisation in the lives of the organisational actor is quite limited. However, if to make the best use of the opportunity to effectively function, the actor and organisation needs to be gently led to imbibe the culture of reciprocation. This can allow for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness of roles of the actors as well as a sense of fulfilment of the transactions. On the other hand, the organisation can ensure that they allow for sufficient space for such trust and autonomy to grow. This can lead to heightened sense of ownership, thereby leading to engagement in the long run. The basis for this relationship is again founded on dignity wherein each actor, whether it be the collective of organisation or the individual actor perceives dignity in their journey.

Such dignity and reciprocation has the potential to lead to a superior sense of meaning from work and fulfilment. These set of relationships not only can pave the way for a highly dynamic culture but also to one that can overcome environmental impacts comfortably.