Impacts of information-providers' perceived cultural backgrounds on information-seeking behaviors: Investigation of American employees' information-seeking behaviors in a Korean multinational corporation in the US

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This current study examined how employees' perception of information-providers' cultural backgrounds impact the patterns of seeking information from culturally different sources. For this examination, this study looked into the information-seeking behaviors in a Korean multinational corporation in the US. Results from paired *t*-tests and a series of hierarchical regression analyses showed the following meaningful findings: (a) American employees' information-seeking behaviors were more strongly discouraged by the perceived power distance for Korean expatriates, compared to the influence of the power distance for American supervisors, and (b) after controlling for gender, organizational tenure, and team tenure, American employees' monitoring of feedback information and their inquiry of task information from direct supervisors positively and significantly predicted communication satisfaction with the information source.

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1. Introduction

With the contemporary changes experienced in spatio-temporal boundaries, the boundaries of institutions and organizations have also extended globally, across nations (Bresman, Birkinshaw, & Nobel, 2010; Chang & Taylor, 1999; Nobel & Birkinshaw, 1998). One of the notable outcomes of these porous and inter-permeable national boundaries is the increase of multinational corporations (MNCs) (Dong, Zou, & Taylor, 2008; Nobel & Birkinshaw, 1998; Williams & Triest, 2009). This increase of MNCs has received much attention from scholars in the field of organizational science primarily due to the differences in structure characterizing these corporations, when compared to traditional domestic organizations. Further, these corporations offer scholars the opportunity to observe and understand unique forms of organizational settings (Gomez & Sanchez, 2005; Roth & Kostova, 2003). In these intercultural organizational environments, one of the most critical issues that require attention is that of the communication among employees of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Particularly, in such intercultural contexts, information-seeking behaviors can be critically affected by the cultural backgrounds of both the information-seekers and -providers. This is mainly because such behaviors are influenced by the information-seekers' perceptions about the various characteristics (e.g., accessibility, expertise, reward power) of the information-providers (Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Morrison & Vancouver, 2000).

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Although a number of researchers have conducted cross-cultural studies that compare the information-seeking behaviors among two or more different countries (Gupta, Govindarajan, & Malhotra, 1999; McDonald, Brown, & Sulsky, 2008; Morrison, Chen, & Salgado, 2004; Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000), we know little about how these behaviors materialize within intercultural contexts. The main limitation of these previous studies is that they accounted only for the cultural background of the information-seekers. This is problematic, as such investigations tend to assume that the cultural backgrounds of information-seekers and -providers are identical. Therefore, in order to more thoroughly investigate this topic, this study paid considerable attention to the cultural backgrounds of information-providers. In other words, this study mainly explored "How do domestic employees differently seek two types of information (technical and feedback information) from culturally different sources?" and "How do these employees' perceptions of their managers' cultural backgrounds affect their information-seeking patterns that are related to communication satisfaction?"

This study explored these questions by analyzing the case of a US-branch office of a Korean MNC. A Korean case is meaningful for this study for two reasons. First, there has been a continuous increase of Korean companies that have advanced into developed countries including the United States and the United Kingdom (Glover & Wilkinson, 2007; Lee & Kim, 2010). For example, according to Ladendorf (2012), Samsung increased its investment in semi-conductor factories in Austin, TX, reaffirming 4 billion dollars of Austin investment. Second, in terms of cultural differences, Korean companies are characterized by unique national and organizational cultures. For instance, founded on a culture of high power distance, Korean companies largely depend on strong hierarchy and top-down communication (Ahn, Kwon, & Sung, 2010; Lee & Anantharaman, 2011). This differs from the US' general culture, which places a relative emphasis on horizontal or bottom-up communication. This implies that intercultural contexts composed of Korean and American cultures will provide scholars and practitioners with more unique and interesting observations of intercultural communication.

Findings from this study will help practitioners identify effective strategies to manage relationships between foreign expatriates and domestic employees, solve intercultural conflicts originating from inappropriate communication, and ultimately improve personal and organizational performances in MNCs. The following section will introduce the main concepts relating to information-seeking behaviors and cultural dimensions and will propose multiple hypotheses.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Information-seeking behaviors

The arguments of Weick and Ashford (2001) and Morrison (2002) show us that information-seeking behaviors reflect organizational members' proactive attitudes toward managing their performance. In regards to this, Morrison (2002) pointed out that unlike organizational research that considers employees as recipients of information, studies of information-seeking behaviors highlight individuals as actors that proactively manage their performance. Miller and Jablin (1991) also state that, "information-seeking attempts are usually defined as deliberate, conscious efforts" (p. 102). This shows that although there exist differences in the level of proactivity among different modes of seeking information, organizational members intentionally and consciously take significant amount of effort to seek out the information they need. Therefore, much of the previous research relies on the assumption that information-seeking behaviors are proactive (Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Crant, 2000).

These proactive behaviors serve critical roles in organizational environments, as today's organizations have increasingly come to emphasize the self-improvement of employees. In other words, organizations now demand employees who can actively learn new knowledge, render themselves more competitive, and ultimately generate more profits (VandeWalle, 2003). In order to meet these expectations, employees' communicative behaviors of seeking information become very important. Furthermore, these behaviors are often positively related to important organizational phenomena including socialization (Flanagin & Waldeck, 2004; Kowtha, 2009; Miller, 1996), leader member exchange (LMX (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007; Lee, Lee, Lee, & Park, 2005), creative performance (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011), and so on. To investigate information-seeking behaviors, previous studies have researched the different modes of seeking information as well as the various sources and types of information that have been sought.

In terms of the modes of seeking information, previous studies have often relied on Ashford's (1986) categorization—inquiry and monitoring—of feedback-seeking behaviors. Such research has considered feedback as a specific form of information (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 2002). *Inquiry* refers to those behaviors where members directly ask the information sources to provide what is needed and requested. *Monitoring* refers to those behaviors where members mostly observe their information sources in order to gain useful cues, not directly requesting the needed information. In addition to these two types of information seeking, Miller and Jablin (1991) proposed seven tactics of seeking information: overt questioning, indirect questioning, third parties, disguising conversations, testing limits, observing, and surveillance. By paying attention to how members seek information, these seven tactics basically fall into either one of Ashford's (1986) two categories. Although clear-cut categorization is difficult to achieve, in general, the first five tactics can be considered as modes of inquiry, and the remaining two can be categorized as modes of monitoring. Thus, this study focused on the two main types of information-seeking behaviors, which are inquiry and monitoring.

There exist multiple taxonomies regarding types of information (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 2002). In their theoretical model, Miller and Jablin (1991) included three different types of information: referent, appraisal, and relational information. Morrison (1993) identified four types of information: technical, referent, social, normative, and performance information.