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Modeling structural activity system of R&D firms in a developing economy to enhance new practices implementation

Mohammed-Aminu Sanda*

Department of Organization and Human Resource Management, University of Ghana Business School, P. O. Box LG 78, Legon, Accra, Ghana

Department of Business Administration, Technology and Social Sciences, Luleå University of Technology, SE-97187, Luleå, Sweden

Abstract

In the middle and late 1960's, large numbers of Research and Development (R&D) firms were established in many developing countries to provide effective services to small and medium scale enterprises. But over the years, the ability of these R&D-oriented firms to provide such effective assistances was constrained due to management challenges. In this regard efforts were made by most of these firms to implement new management practices derived from successful business principles and practices of firms in the EU and elsewhere, in order to help strengthened their capability to provide effective client services. Yet, there was the realisation that the efforts of most of these R&D firms to implement and internalise the new management practices were constrained and as such not successful. The purpose of this study therefore, was to identify and understand the factors that constrained the R&D's practices implementation and internalization efforts. Using a systemic structural activity theoretical framework and a qualitative approach, the implementation effort of an R&D firm in Trinidad was explored. The results showed that during the firm's practice implementation, the quality of its internal environment was diffused as a result of employees and management seeing things in different perspectives. This resulted in the emergence of a fuzzy understanding of the firm's corporate culture by employees, with individual interpretations and understandings of the firm's organizational values and norms. It is concluded that the R&D's effort to implement and internalize new management practices was not only constrained by factors relating to its external environment, but also by the prevalence of activity contradictions within its structural and activity system.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +233-57-166-9945.
E-mail address: masanda@ug.edu.gh

1. Introduction

During the resurgence of industrialization throughout the world in the middle and late 1960's, large numbers of Research and Development (R&D) oriented firms were established in many industrial developing countries, to provide assistance to Small and medium-scale enterprises (SME) with the provision of technical and business extension services, testing facilities, problem solving services as well as research and development assistance. Over the years, the ability of these R&D-oriented firms to provide effective assistance to these small and medium scale enterprises was constrained, and these constraints were identified to be management related rather than technological ([1]). In this regard efforts were made by most of these firms to implement new management practices. The new management practices, in this context, were viewed as practices to help strengthened the capability of R&D firms to support the development of SMEs. These practices were derived by [1] from successful business principles and management practices of firms in the EU and elsewhere, through extensive research of more than sixty R&D firms in 31 countries. Yet, there was the realisation that the efforts of most R&D firms in the industrial developing countries to implement and internalise these best management practices were constrained by undetermined environmental factors.

The purpose of this study therefore, was to identify and understand the factors that constrained an R&D's practices implementation and internalization efforts, as a case. The firm was operated with a multi-disciplinary staff of 120 persons including 40 professionals, 45 technicians and 35 support staff. The firm provides technological services to other enterprises both locally and regionally. Its mission is to provide technical and technological support, create and transfer technology to the producers of goods and services, and maintain a positive work environment that encourages employee commitment to the firm's financial viability and success. In the pursuit of its mission, the firm underwent a restructuring programme to improve the quality of services it was providing to its clients. The restructuring included the upgrade of the physical infrastructure, acquisition of new equipment, development of the human resource capability, and improvement of the operation system.

2. Literature review

In recent times, concern over the gap between the theory of what people do and what people actually do has given rise to the 'practice' approach in management literature focusing upon the way that actors interact with the social and physical features of context in the everyday activities that constitute practice. According to [2], the term practice implies repetitive performance in order to become 'practised' (i.e. to attain recurrent, habitual or routinized accomplishment of particular actions), and a theory of practice brings recursiveness and adaptation into a dialectic tension in which the two are inextricably linked. Thus practice occurs not only in macro contexts that provide commonalities of action, but also in micro contexts in which action is highly localised ([2]) and the interaction between these contexts provides an opportunity for adaptive practice. In this respect, recursiveness is always improvised; there can be a durability about it that constrains attempts to transform the sequences. This durability may be considered a 'code-of-practice' or even 'best practice', it being sedimented rules and resources that govern how to act. According to [2], practice is an evolving process of social order arising from the interplay between external and internal social structure building. In this context, external structure is the wider societal context, in which there is a current of social movement, and change is carried out within the internal context in interaction with the external context. Therefore, there is an ongoing process of social becoming that is realised through a chain of social events, or practice. Hence, in a community of practice, individual thought is essentially social and is developed in interaction with the practical activities of a community through living and participating in its experiences over time ([3,4]). Thus, to understand practice, it is important to move beyond institutional similarities to penetrate the situated and localised nature of practice in particular contexts ([2]). Practice is seen as local and situated, arising from the moment-by-moment interactions between actors, on one hand, and between actors and the environments of their action, on the other ([5]). It is noted by [2] that rather than looking for structural invariants, normative rules of conduct, or preconceived cognitive schema, therefore, practice scholars should investigate the processes whereby particular, uniquely constituted circumstances are systematically interpreted so as to render meaning shared. As it is argued by [2], the theoretical rationale for a study of practices may be found in activity theory. In this context, she relates to the activity theory premises that psychological development is a social process

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