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**CASE STUDY**

ENTREPRENEURSHIP, CULTURE AND MOBILITY OF KNOWLEDGE WORKERS IN EUROPEAN ICT SMEs

**Report on the preliminary findings of an investigation of the interaction between culture, innovation, entrepreneurship and policy making in European ICT SMEs in various EU regions in Ireland, Greece and the Netherlands and how it affects the mobility of knowledge workers**

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to describe the preliminary results of a research which intends to explore the relation between culture, innovation, entrepreneurship and policy-making in European ICT Small-and-Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the sector of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The proposed research has the following aims:

It will seek to:

a)To map the various stakeholders involved in the cross section of culture, innovation, entrepreneurship and the use of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) instruments e.g. the various EU governments, the entrepreneurs, external stakeholders etc. b) To highlight ways in which the above mentioned stakeholders make this interaction at the cross section between culture, innovation, entrepreneurship and the use of SHRM instruments more effective in order to generate insights into the way in which these companies utilize their human resources in Europe so as to meet the challenges of the new globalized environment in which they have to operate. In particular, the study will investigate how the mobility of knowledge workers of ICT SMEs can be increased across the EU.

According to the Global Network Society Theory, the European Union has been described by Castells (1998) as ‘the networked state’. Although a lot of other research has taken place as regards national cultures and globalization and their relation with innovation in both developed and developing countries there is dearth of research about SMEs as entities operating in a multi-level governance European Union where regionalism and multiple cultures thrive. What is more, the role of the informal networks has not been adequately researched. In this context a study of Regional Culture (RC) and its interaction with SME entrepreneurship is most important; The study of National Culture (NC) differences comes second.

In a Eurostat survey by Strack (2003), regarding ICT companies in particular, the growing importance of the ICT sector is reflected in the number of applications in the European Patent Office (EPO). This number has more than doubled from 6.8% to 15.5% between 1991 and 2001. Despite this increase (which also reflects regional disparities) the EU still lags behind both the US and Japan. According to another Eurostat survey by Larsson (2004), in the EU the major internal factor identified by small and medium enterprises as a barrier to innovation is the lack of qualified personnel. The research described in this paper can aid understanding as to how to increase mobility of knowledge workers to fill in vacant positions in ICT SMEs across the EU. It can also help us understand how SHRM can contribute to this end.

**The various variables in our research and their interrelationship to each other**

Below follows a description of the variables involved in our research, i.e. EU ICT SMEs, SHRM, Culture and knowledge labour mobility, and their interrelationship to each other.

**EU ICT SMEs**

According to the report of the Project Workshop by Scholarios (2005) following the Indicator study of ICT SMEs in seven EU countries participants recognized the need of ‘best practice’ Human Resource Management (HRM) recommendations in recruitment/selection, job design, organizational climate, training and learning and career development. However, according to an Indic@tor study itself (2005) EU ICT SMEs were found to suffer from a persistent lack of resources for the development of human capital. Regarding national and regional policies in the ICT sector in the EU, Friedewald and Kimpeler (2006) have found that relatively little policy activity in European Union state governments is directed specifically at increasing the competitiveness of ICT producers. With few significant exceptions, such as Ireland, such initiatives as do exist focus mainly on the development and commercialization of technology, rather than on skills, employment or fiscal and investment climates. Moreover, despite the numerous policy-driven programs in support of the ICT sector on all levels to varying extents, the center of gravity lies at the national level. Only in countries with federated political structures, like Italy and Germany, were significant (i.e. substantially funded) and independent policy programs found at the regional level.

**Strategic Human Resource Management**

According to Boxall (1992) in an organization SHRM means accepting and involving the Human Resouces (HR) function as a strategic partner in the formulation and implementation of the company’s strategies through HR activities such as recruiting, selecting, training and rewarding personnel. The key features of SHRM are, according to Truss and Gratton (1994):

* An explicit linkage of some kind between HR policy and practices and overall organizational strategic aims and the organization environment.
* Some organizing schema linking individual HR interventions so that they are mutually supportive.
* To a great extent, a down-the-line (devolved) responsibility for the management of human resources.

Truss and Gratton (1994) pinpoint towards the existence of contextual variables which influence the interrelationship between strategy and human resource strategy. These are external ones at the level of society and internal, organizational ones. In both cases the importance of culture is being recognized. By quoting Hrebiniak et al (1988):

“The general social, economic, political, legal and cultural factors affecting aggregate organizational activity… as well as factors associated with a specific industry (rate of growth, entry and mobility barriers, cost structure and so forth). (Hrebiniak et al., 1988: 4)

And Adler and Jelinek (1986):

“Culture, whether organizational or national, is frequently defined as a set of taking-for-granted assumptions, expectations, or rules for being in the world… the culture concept emphasizes the shared cognitive approaches to reality that distinguish a given group from others.” (Adler and Jelinek, 1986: 74)

**Culture**

In the light of the changing thoughts on national and even regional cultures, fits Hofstede’s (1983) research in which he investigated work-related values among IBM employees in 50 different countries. Hofstede (1983) indicates that the way of thinking on management as it was in the 1950s and 1960s changed during the 1970s and 1980s. Before that period, it was thought that one universal management theory would be applicable to all cultures and countries. What appeared to be working in the US and Western Europe would also fit in second and third world countries. Following this seminal work by Hoftede (1983), the importance of culture and innovativeness can be seen by the phethora of relevant studies in the literature review presented by Doesburg (2006). Earley (2006) is critical of values-based large scale surveys like Hostede’s (1983) and the GLOBE research team’s (2004). Instead, he asks for a grand or mid-range theory that will help us see the linkages between culture and organizational phenomena providing a list of such studies at the same time.

**Knowledge labour mobility**

According to Williams et al (2004) labour flows are being recomposed by Europeanisation tendencies and globalization, even if these are strongly mediated by the national. In general, there are changing international and intranational divisions of labour, and these are leading to, and being facilitated by, new forms of mobility. There are diverse flows of skilled and unskilled labour, and increasingly short-term mobility. This responds to shortened product cycles, increased emphasis on enhanced human capital and knowledge, and shifts to more flexible forms of production. There is also greater emphasis on social and technical –as opposed to routinised skills. We need a broadly based interpretation of the constitution of human capital as we know far more about routine and technical skills, than we do about interpersonal skills, language capital or the role of cultural diversity as a source of innovation.

From an institutional point of view, it is accepted that innovation relies on ‘institutionalized learning’ and knowledge acquisition (Johnson and Lundvall, 1993). This has led to recent debates as to whether the region is a critical, institutionalized learning space. Firms manage innovations through organizing, for limited time periods, the co-presence of a diverse spectrum of resources, capital and people (and their networks) for the completion of a limited task. Such temporally and spatially specific collaboration inherently relies on international mobility for learning and innovation. Given that tacit knowledge is embodied in individual workers, it is significantly predicated on co-presence. Human mobility is critical in this, with individuals performing the roles of specific knowledge carriers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The following framework describes the relationship between the various variables in our research. Since the subject of the study is ICT SMEs in various EU regions the various variables interact with each other in an EU regional context with ICT SMEs being at the center of this interaction.

EU Region

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest a paradigmatic framework consisting of four mutually exclusive options: Radical Humanist, Radical Structuralist, Functionalist and Intrepretivist. Deetz (1996) in his critique of Burrell and Morgan’s model (1979) suggests complementarity of forms of research questions and procedures is probably better. Instead of considering the four paradigms as mutually exclusive we should accept interplay between them. In the light of these suggestions, two of these are the most relevant for the aims of the current research: a) The *radical structuralist* paradigm and b) The interpretivist paradigm. The intended research seems to be defined by the interplay between these two paradigms, the radical structuralist paradigm being the more relevant of the two. Relational constructionism, as explained by Hosking and Hjorth (2004), is concerned with mind operations and sense making like interpretivism does. At the same time, however, it places emphasis on relational processes that (re)construct identities and worlds as cultures and social interactions. This coincides with radical structuralists’ view of social dynamics as resulting from contestation of political groups and power structures. By speaking about relational realities, meaning what people make real through their interactions, it places them in the socio-political context of radical structuralists.

Reflexive Sociology (Bourdieu, 1992) will be the main driver of the proposed research framework. It is suitable for our research since theory, according to Bourdieu (1992) is seen as a knowledge-producing activity and not theory for its sake separated from actual research. Therefore, this holistic framework will enrich our understanding of the researched companies’ reality. Secondly, Bourdieu (1992) has developed a comprehensive theory regarding capital and its various forms. At the micro level of analysis there are two conceptual tools, dispositions (a notion wider than attitudes) and capital. According to Harker et al. (1990) Bourdieu’s definition of capital is a very wide one. It includes both material things that can have symbolic value as well as ‘untouchable’ but culturally significant attributes such as prestige, status and authority (referred to as symbolic capital), along with cultural capital (defined as culturally valued taste and consumption patterns).

Another merit of the described approach is that it serves a multi-level analysis framework in its epistemological, ontological and methodological sense, since Bourdieu (1992) defines three levels: a) practice (micro or individual level; in our case the knowledge workers) b) habitus (meso or rational level which allows for discussion in greater depth the relation between the agents; in our case the ICT SMEs) and c) field (macro or the institutions and the structures in which they are embedded level; in our case the particular EU Region where the ICT companies are based). Such a classification allows us to measure cultural constructs at both micro- meso- and macro levels.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Case studies**

There is a debate in the case study in the literature as to whether the case study forms a research strategy or a final product. Yin (1994) takes the stance that it is an overall strategy with specific methods. Stake (1994, 1998, 2000), on the other hand, adopts the approach that case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. Case is a ‘specific, unique, bounded system’ according to his approach (Stake, 2000: 436). In an eloquent way , Patton (2002) provides a discussion on cases as ‘units of analysis’ and the choice of cases is made during the design stage, which forms the basis of purposeful sampling, and revised later according to the richness of the data generated. The purpose of the process is to gather and present comprehensive and in-depth information about each case that result in a final product: case study. The term ‘case accounts’ is used in this research to describe the cases constructed because the term ‘account’ conveys a stance taken with a view to presenting a rich and vicarious story of the participants.

**Research phases**

There were three phases that marked this research: a) Orientation phase b) Focused exploration phase and c) writing-up phase. The orientation phase, which lasted between February and November 2008, was characterized by mainly engaging with entrepreneurship and innovation in ICT SMEs. It also involved reading through the relevant literature, formulation the research questions and conducting a pilot study in the Netherlands and Greece to test the applicability of the proposed research methodology. The results of which were presented in the form of developmental paper in two high tech scientific conferences in Turin in May and Manchester in June from which useful feedback was received. As a result, the research methods and interview questions were reconsidered and necessary amendments were made. Having shaped the research questions regarding mobility of knowledge workers in ICT SMEs, I identified the criteria for the selection of the companies for the case study. The companies that were approached were companies that had been created in successful University incubators in the three EU regions under study, namely, the Eindhoven, Dublin and Patras regions. I first addressed the person in charge of the incubator by telephone and e-mails including a synopsis of my research, possible benefits for the incubator and a letter of intention. Wherever necessary this involved trying to directly communicating with the ICT entrepreneurs, talk and convince them for the usefulness of my research and my credibility as a researcher over the phone in order to get an appointment.

**Interviews**

First face –to –face interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs in the premises of ICT SMEs in the various EU regions. To this end semi-structured interviews were used based on the research questions formulated according to the literature review. According to Robson (2002), the semi-structured interview has predetermined questions but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer’s perception of what seems most appropriate. Yin (1994) argues that evidence for case studies may come from six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts. However, as Walsham (1995) explains, with respect to interpretive case studies as an outside observer, it can be argued that interviews are the primary data source, since it is through this method that the researcher can best access the interpretations that participants have regarding the actions and events which have or are taking place, and the views and aspirations of themselves and other participants.

**Data analysis: Action research**

As Robson (2002) stresses, there are affinities between action research and the flexible qualitative strategy. The flexibility of case studies in design and approach, as well as in their use of method, encourages their use as a model for action research. Also according to Chambers (2003) an ethnographic perspective like the one offered by action research can aid practitioners in a variety of fields, presumably to increase their sensitivity towards issues related to cultural differences and cultural process. The analysis involved four stages as described by Huxham (2002) and Vangen and Huxham (2003). The approach is intended to lead to the development of practice-oriented theory and is consistent with the spirit of recent calls for management research to contribute simultaneously to practice and theory (Hodgkinson, 2001; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998). The stages in data analysis included a) data review, b) data inclusion and cluster formation c) cluster review and framework formation and d) moulding the theory.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

1. **ICT SMEs in Patras**

The ICT entrepreneurs in Patras did not find any significant differences regarding the way business in their sector is conducted in respective companies across the EU. Where they thought there might be a difference would be on the person in charge of the company who influences its strategy. Since the subject matter is information and communication technology, they thought that businesses across the EU operated in similar ways in terms of management. Since these companies have been handling processes and data more, it is very easy for such a company to transmit its way of working from one company to the other. They said that their companies were oriented towards a European Union market or even Asia and competing and cooperating with companies from other European countries. It would have been quite differently if they dealt with manufacturing and tradable goods competing in the Greek market only.

Coming to cultural influences, in the latter case they felt that National Culture would play a role. They felt that the role of National Culture in Greece was negative regarding the formation of technological companies, the lack of planning and infrastructure and the negative attitude of engineers, preferring the security of employment in the public instead of the private sector. The entrepreneurs believed that although there was an influence of their National Culture that could be limited by applying the necessary management rules. On the contrary they felt that the National Culture of the countries they aimed at mattered more. Geographical proximity was important to them in the sense that they considered it easier to cooperate with European countries which were perceived as being closer to Greece in cultural terms.

The interviewees recognized the role that Universities could play through training to assist mobility especially if aided by European Union initiatives. It was felt that the quality of technological education was high, still training that encouraged people to be entrepreneurially and innovation-oriented and mobile was considered to be lacking. There was no involvement with local authorities regarding regional policies that promote mobility. The participants were not aware of local authorities’ initiatives to boost mobility or had not yet contacted them or participated in any of the activities or events organized to this end. Still the entrepreneurs were strongly interested in attracting not just good but charismatic people to the region. For this reason they were willing to offer people extra incentives in terms of monetary rewards or a pleasant working environment. They also try to improve mobility for their companies by encouraging the mobility of their personnel for example through training in other countries. What the interviewees felt their companies lacked was people who apart from technical knowledge would also possess management skills for technology companies, that particular knowledge of management being in short supply.

The entrepreneurs recognized the role that could be played by SHRM to assist mobility. Some of the companies already made use of an SHRM expert. Those who did not attributed this to a matter of size. The entrepreneurs felt that when the company would grow to employ about twenty people that would be the ideal moment to ask for the assistance of such an expert. Still there was a mistrust regarding Greek SHRM experts and those that already employed the services of such an expert used a person abroad.

The interviewees felt that cultural diversity resulting from increased mobility would be an asset for their companies as various insights would be used so that the optimum result would be achieved. It would also add to the company’s extrovertness. The mobility itself could be both physical and mental as was already the case for the companies. However, all the entrepreneurs dismissed the possibility that mental mobility might totally replace physical mobility for their companies. Different reasons were brought forth for this including the greater effectiveness of face-to-face communication and company loyalty. There was also a difference regarding future forms of employment. The entrepreneurs in the smaller companies of the sample felt that people working at a distance associated with their company with loose contracts would help them as there is a circle in the needs of their companies.

**b) ICT SMEs in Dublin**

Entrepreneurs in ICT SMEs in Ireland felt that there were not great differences that would create barriers in the way SMEs in their sector conducted business across the EU. Regional differences and culture did not matter since they dealt with a global type of service and product such microelectronics that was not influenced by regional flavours and tastes. All entrepreneurs agreed that culture influenced entrepreneurship in Ireland also believing that the national culture of Ireland encouraged entrepreneurship. Despite the country limitations (smaller country and market, limited access to business angels and venture capital) they considered their entrepreneurial culture closer to that of the United States, for example in terms of risk taking, rather than that of the rest of the European Union. The most important aspect was language. It together with the knowledge of networks was considered as necessary in order to enter a foreign market.

For them the role of geographical proximity was important for cultural matters relating with the use of a common language. They felt it was easier to do business with countries that spoke English, starting from the UK. They also said that English was the international language for technological companies and nowadays language proficiency has improved across the European Union. At the same time, lack of good knowledge of English was considered as the single most important barrier against the mobility of knowledge workers towards Ireland as its knowledge was necessary both for communication with other members of staff as well as with the company customers.

The interviewees replied there were no regional policies boosting mobility towards Dublin. The government encourages people to move outside Dublin. Based on the government’s national plan the decentralization of Dublin is promoted and the creation of employment opportunities through the creation of satellite cities. This is also where national policy plans do not coincide with regional culture. The entrepreneurs felt that in a small country like Ireland with a small population there were more similarities since the same legislation and support structure existed.

The trend is for technology professionals to come to Ireland because of the jobs created by the companies that arrive there. As a result there is a pool of talents and skills for ICT entrepreneurs to choose from. Still, there is the issue of accessibility to that mobility, how the companies can make themselves visible to this work force. Although there were discussions with policy and law makers the interviewees thought there were no decisions made because they did not want to touch upon the subject of immigration. The entrepreneurs said that those who come to Ireland have been concerned about what rights they’ll have and if they stay there for a certain duration and will be able to gain access to citizenship. They believed in the role of training at University to boost mobility.

As with the entrepreneurs in Patras the same trend applies regarding the use of SHRM to assist mobility in the sense that the research participants stated that in the incubation center they received SHRM advice. Still they considered they would not be in a position to employ the services of an SHRM expert until they grew the company to the size of 20 people or so in terms of staff. Cultural diversity as a result of increased mobility was considered as something that would enrich the Irish culture and at the same time make them wiser as they expand on how to approach countries with different cultures. Mobility could be both physical and mental. Still, again mental mobility would replace physical mobility only in part.

**ICT SMEs in Eindhoven**

ICT entrepreneurs in Eindhoven felt that they had their own style of doing business. They as a culture was considered to be more open and internationally oriented, good at communicating, listening to what people say and adapt to that. The culture of a country was considered important for developing new technology and setting up a company in the international market. There were differences identified between regions such as that the fact that there was a higher concentration of ICT companies in Utrecht and Amsterdam and that in the Eindhoven region. Another difference that they identified had to do with the emphasis of companies eg in Amsterdam on Public Relations and marketing whereas in Eindhoven the emphasis was on technical solutions and the product. The size of the country being small they felt assisted in an attitude towards mobility of people from a business point of view. They thought that as culture defines who you are they thought it influenced innovation and entrepreneurship. Geographical proximity in Europe did not play a role as in their opinion ICT companies in Europe operated in more or less the same way in terms of doing business and cooperation in contrast to companies in Asia.

These entrepreneurs were not aware of any regional policies that would promote mobility in the region of Eindhoven and did not believe in the effect of training at University as a means of assisting mobility of knowledge workers. They thought that the impact of mobility in the Netherlands was big. Their needs in specialized personnel had to do with software engineers with business skills, reflecting the strong market orientation of the companies. In order to improve mobility for their companies they cooperated and networked with other companies abroad. Working on digital projects did not require people to move physically. As long as the company managed to remain small and achieve their targets at the same time mobility was not considered necessary. Therefore when they needed somebody to do physical work they looked for him/ her in the immediate region.

As the companies in the sample were small, they did not employ the services of an SHRM expert for mobility although they recognized the utility of such a service for the future. They were positively predisposed towards cultural diversity because of increased mobility as they thought that the experience would assist them with customers from different cultures. Both types of mobility were considered an option that they already materialised. Still they did not believe that mental mobility could totally replace physical mobility as you need to know someone in order to do business with him. For the future they envisaged a flexible mix of employment as the one that existed.

**Bourdieu and capitals: Transformation between capitals and application on the current research**

The application of Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital regarding the mobility of knowledge workers has generated useful insights. Capital is a term that is conceptualized by Bourdieu, and utilized in this research, as a more encompassing term than ‘resource’. ‘Social capital’ has been defined as the sum of the actual and potential resources that can be deployed through membership in social networks. Bourdieu’s notion of capital is relational and process oriented. Capital is created through a multiplicity of relations, such as observed in the incubator centre, the respective region in each country where the companies are based and the educational institutions.

THESIS CONTRIBUTION

**Theoretical outcomes**

Many suggestions have been made regarding the traditional resource-based approach to entrepreneurship. In the new multicultural and multiregional Europe, Johannisson (2005) suggests, we deal with a sense-making and identity creation approach. Here a persistent diversity of national cultures gives elements of an entrepreneurial and innovative culture that may complement each other. This study will make a contribution to the debate. It will also try to answer the question whether in order to deal with personnel mobility we will have to strengthen a unique, across-the-border ICT culture. In particular whether the creation of a culture based on Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Mobility is the answer to the problem, as has been suggested by Ulijn and Gould (2002).

**Practical outcomes**

The entrepreneurs will be aided to discover discrepancies between what they think- theory and actual practice. This will help them test their assumptions, whether the HRM strategies they apply facilitate personnel exchange between ICT SMEs. Therefore the formal management structures that will contribute to this end will be identified. The identification of management gaps will enable SHRM to advise on the best policies to attract, retain and train valuable knowledge workers as well as best utilize existing personnel. It can also help managers in full time and interim management and work on project-based organizations, in matrix management and international global teams. Finally, it can help in policy- making regarding policies and diversity in global firms (See Nicolopoulou, K., Karatas-Ozkan, M. and Tatli, A., 2007, special issue Equal Opportunities International Journal on Global Knowledge Workers) and also regulations on global knowledge work. This study does not claim that its results will provide all the definitive answers regarding mobility of knowledge workers. Still it aspires to be a good starting point in the study of ICT SMEs in the new multicultural Europe of the Regions.

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