

## ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AS KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATOR IN ROMANIAN KIBS

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**Abstract.** *The present study addresses theoretical and practical aspects of Romanian KIBS and the way organizational culture acts as a knowledge integrator in such companies. The relevance of the research topic is supported by the KIBS' widely agreed-upon contribution to innovation and sustainable development. This study aims to identify how three different Romanian KIBS acquire, document, share, store, and apply knowledge based on their organizational culture specificities. The research applied a qualitative method by analyzing data acquired following 12 interviews with members of three selected Romanian SMEs categorized as KIBS. As a result of the research, the authors found that KIBS favour organizational cultures (clan and adhocracy models) which facilitate collaboration, engagement, and knowledge integration. This exploratory research adds to the topic of knowledge management in KIBS and its relationship with the organizational culture.*

**Keywords:** *knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS); knowledge management (KM); organizational culture (OC); knowledge integration.*

### Introduction

In the Knowledge Economy (KE), knowledge is one of the currencies helping organizations outrun their competitors and take the lead in globally interconnected markets. Furthermore, organizations activating in the Knowledge Intensive Business Services (KIBS) sector often play a strategic role in innovation and sustainable development due to accumulating knowledge and technical expertise, which is then shared with or transferred to their clients.

Introduced by Miles et al. nearly two decades ago (1995), the KIBS notion has a powerful connection with knowledge. Miles et al. (1995) highlight knowledge's role in KIBS in their report. According to them, professional knowledge is instrumental for enterprises in both their internal and external activities targeted at clients. Despite a lack of consensus in the KIBS literature, it is generally agreed that knowledge stays at the heart of KIBS, enabling them to contribute to the innovativeness and development of different market areas (Amancio et al., 2021; Grandinetti, 2018; Martinez-Fernandez & Miles, 2006; Zieba & Kończyński, 2019). As emphasized by Miles et al. (1995), technical and professional KIBS (t-KIBS and p-KIBS) are not only users but also producers and carriers of new technology, often following aggressive innovation strategies" (1995, p. III).

The present paper aims to develop knowledge of the KIBS segment by implementing a qualitative study focused on three Romanian small-medium enterprises (SMEs) activating in this field. The key findings are relevant for knowledge management (KM) academic and business environments as they contribute to a better understanding of organizational culture (OC) 's impact on knowledge acquiring, sharing, disseminating, storing, applying, protecting, etc., within KIBS.

According to Isac, Dobrin, Raphaelalani, and Sonko (2021), numerous studies have demonstrated the critical role that OC plays in shaping organizations. Additionally, in the specific context of the present study, it is also important to note that different types of organizations are defined by different levels of knowledge entropy. According to Bratianu (2019), the concept of knowledge entropy presents the potential allocation of knowledge in an organization at a given moment: "although we consider organizational knowledge as being like a field, in reality, knowledge resides with individual people which leads to a certain distribution of individual knowledge, at a specific moment of time" (Bratianu, 2019, p.363).

The structure of this paper is as follows: after this introductory section, a literature review covering the key concepts of OC, knowledge management, and KIBS is presented. Next, the study methodology is explained in the third section, followed by a discussion of the main findings and implications. Finally, the study ends with the presentation of conclusions.

## **Literature review**

### *Organisational culture*

An organization's culture affects how a collectivity behaves. Therefore, it has to be considered as a contingency factor in any program for developing organizations and human resources policies.

From a sociological perspective, organizational culture is a characteristic that enables tight relationships inside organizations, relying on "taken-for-granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories, and definitions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011, p.19). As the authors assert in a widely utilized model that builds on a framework proposed by Schein (1990), organizational culture includes elements ranging from unobservable to observable, i.e., implicit assumptions (about how things are done), conscious contracts and norms (rules and procedures for human interaction), artifacts (such as office style, clothing, goals, logos, etc.) and explicit behaviors of that

culture's members. Cameron and Quinn (2011) stress organizational culture and climate differences. While the latter is temporary in nature and comprises attitudes, feelings, and perceptions, the first is durable and change-resistant.

Starting from the competing values framework developed by Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983), which posits a model for assessing organizational effectiveness based on the analysis of three value dimensions (control vs. flexibility, internal vs. external, and means vs. ends), Cameron and Quinn (2011) identified four types of organizational culture: clan (collaborate), adhocracy (create), market (compete) and hierarchy (control). The clan culture enhances cohesion and hence participation and involvement; the adhocracy culture provides opportunities for the employees' development and well-being; the market culture stresses competition while the hierarchical culture is bureaucratic, and both are conducive to dissatisfaction at work (Bianchi, Tontini & Gomes, 2021). Following empirical research in t-KIBS, Bianchi et al. (2021) concluded that market culture positively affects the individual propensity to innovate. At the same time, the employees' perception of organizational culture impacts their subjective well-being.

Schein's model explains cultural processes that support organizational innovation (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Organizational culture has a deep impact on a variety of organizational processes, performance, the employees. Thus managers and leaders are recommended to develop a strong organizational culture to improve business success (Shahzad, Luqman, Khan, & Shabbir, 2012).

#### *KIBS and organizational culture*

KIBS can play various roles in the innovation process in collaboration with their clients, with whom they engage in interactive learning processes (Santos-Vijande, Gonzalez-Mieres, & Lopez-Sanchez, 2013). They can be sources, facilitators or transmitters of innovation. Within KIBS, organizational culture plays a positive role in promoting the process of knowledge sharing in two ways: directly, through offering the people the right instruments to learn from each other, and indirectly, through a series of mediators, such as formal knowledge governance tools, autonomy, job satisfaction, knowledge-sharing opportunity, organizational commitment, sense of well-being, subjective norms, and trust (Sawan, 2021). Moreover, a series of factors impact how the knowledge-sharing process is performed within a company, organizational culture being one of the most significant elements (Alexandru et al., 2020; Farooq, 2020; Vățămănescu et al., 2015, 2020, 2021).

Cho, Kim, Park, and Cho (2013) have investigated the linkages between organizational culture and KIBS service quality by employing the lenses of the organizational learning values – the commitment to learning, open-mindedness, and shared vision – asserted by Sinkula, Baker, and Noordewier (1997) and the SERVICEQUAL assessment model proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). SERVICEQUAL puts forward a framework for the evaluation of service quality on five dimensions: tangibles (appearance of facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials), reliability (dependability and accuracy of services), responsiveness (willingness to provide prompt services to customers), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees) and empathy (individualized attention to customers) (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Cho et al. (2013) concluded that various types of organizational culture affected

differently the learning orientation. At the same time, the learning orientation values influenced organizational learning behaviors, positively impacting service quality in KIBS.

Studies that focused on the role of organizational culture in KIBS showed its positive influence on firm performance and innovativeness. Bomm, De Montreuil Carmona and Gomes (2022) found empirically that leadership styles also impact organizational culture and learning, positively affecting service innovation and performance in t-KIBS. Santos-Vijande, López-Sánchez, and González-Mieres (2012) established that a firm's organizational learning and innovative culture affect innovation and competitiveness. The authors assert that organizational learning is a predictor of innovativeness as a form of organizational culture and, simultaneously, an indicator of organizational values that promote openness to new ideas and change. In a related work concerning KIBS, Santos-Vijande et al. (2013) tested and confirmed the mediating effect of customers' appraisal and front-line employees' participation in new service co-creation in relation to the organisational innovative culture.

### *Knowledge management and organisational culture*

Leaders of successful organizations are consistently searching for better ways to improve performance and results. Knowledge Management (KM) is a broad, multi-dimensional concept and covers most aspects of the enterprise's activities. Enterprises must create and sustain adequate intellectual capital resources to be competitive and successful. They must set priorities and integrate the goals of managing intellectual capital and effective knowledge processes. The knowledge embedded in the corporate culture is part of an organization's structural capital (Edvinsson & Sullivan, 1996).

Knowledge management is promoted as an important and necessary factor for organizational survival and maintenance of competitive strength. To remain at the forefront, organizations need a good capacity to retain, develop, organize, and utilize their employees' capabilities. Knowledge and the management of knowledge appear to be regarded as increasingly important features for organizational survival (Mårtensson, 2000). Brătianu, Vatamanescu, Anagnoste, and Gandolfo (2021) highlight the importance of decision-making within organizations and in managerial work from a KM perspective.

Knowledge has come to be considered a valuable strategic resource that can provide competitive advantages. Individual knowledge is integrated at the organizational level through leadership, management, technology, and organizational culture (Brătianu, 2022). Knowledge is a fundamental resource for developing dynamic capabilities such as organizational learning (Brătianu, 2022), and is paramount in organizational decision-making (Brătianu & Bejinaru, 2019). In the KM research tradition, knowledge is mainly analyzed from Newtonian philosophy ground bases, defined by linearity and tangibility. Nevertheless, a paradigm change has been introduced when knowledge began to be understood through the energy field metaphor, characterized by nonlinearity and intangibility (Brătianu & Vasilache, 2009).

## Methodology

This research was conducted between May and July 2022 with regard to three Romanian KIBS. The concerned companies are active in IT development, digital marketing and PR, and advertising, respectively.

The interview method has been chosen in accordance with the goals of the research. The twelve interviews with top managers from three KIBS companies took place online via Google Meet and Zoom, lasted up to one hour each, and were recorded with the consent of the participants, for research purposes. The discussions between the researchers and the interviewees were based on a semi-structured interview type.

According to Saunders and Townsend (2016), the common practice indicates a number between 6 and 12 participants as appropriate to achieve saturation in qualitative research with relatively homogenous samples. A thematic qualitative data analysis ensued (Oxford Handbook, 2014).

## Results and discussions

### *KIBS Company A*

KIBS company A is an SME activating in the Romanian advertising industry for 16 years. It had a little over 30 employees at the end of 2021.

According to the respondents, knowledge stays at the core of their business activity, ensuring that the creative process reaches the strategic purposes: "creation without knowledge is art, not advertising". Through OC lenses, this affirmation can easily be understood as an organizational metaphor specific to the field of activity and the enterprise. Moreover, to highlight the self-assumed organizational mission of knowledge integration, the respondents revealed that KIBS A is considered an advertising specialists' incubator in their activity segment. This points to the higher mission assumed by the company, which we notice is closely related to knowledge sharing and development in the sector.

When asked whether they consider that knowledge sharing is encouraged at their company's level, all respondents confirmed. At the same time, some of them highlighted their opinions by adding terms like "100%" or "totally" to their responses. Furthermore, in Company A, a "*stellar configuration of knowledge sharing, from everyone to everyone*", emerged early in the interviews and transpired towards the end as a fundamental value and an organizational enabler of knowledge integration. This essential organizational norm is materialized through specific actions, such as frequent creative brainstorming sessions, and instant communication tools, such as WhatsApp, on top of face-to-face and e-mail conversations. According to one of the interviewees, the need to create viral campaigns in the disruptive advertising industry transforms even "memes" into potential strategic knowledge resources. According to the Oxford Languages online Dictionary, a meme is "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations" (Oxford Languages).

Acting in accordance with the declared values, KIBS A manages to access a wide range of knowledge fragments, from employees' technical know-how and specific market information and consumption statistics to cultural references and personal hobbies insights. According to an interviewee, "since our industry is so eclectic, inspiration can come from anywhere: Netflix, art exhibitions, anything". Next, a thorough and qualitative knowledge creation process unfolds, focused on developing relevant knowledge from existing fragments. According to another respondent, "it is not enough to gather data, rather comprehend, analyze and use data you obtain through research".

Second, at the client-related level, the respondents indicated that they have a specific knowledge-sharing ritual for the clients, where they prepare and present the theoretical backgrounds of the decisions taken in developing the services. According to an interviewee, "Mainly, clients pay us to solve their business problem. What we do at the beginning of each presentation is to include a theory section that we include in the fees in order to align our knowledge".

During the interview of one respondent, a myth about the clients' expectations relative to industry knowledge was presented. This can be an idea that the advertising agencies have drawn based on their professional experience, which has been tested and confirmed until it became a popular belief or a myth within the industry, as mentioned by our interviewee. The mythological meaning of the tale was supported by a mix of verbal and non-verbal messages: "there is an obsession in the industry for an agency to provide perfect information, in no time and with little to no knowledge about the industry", as explained.

Based on the most relevant components identified as knowledge integrators, KIBS A can be considered as a company with a solid knowledge-sharing culture, strongly manifested within the organization but also present in the clients' relationship layer. For KIBS A, the research findings reveal that knowledge is a critical asset, and a significant part of the company's OC revolves around integrating knowledge within the company. It appears that the company endorses a clan cultural model, by stimulating collaboration and staff involvement.

### *KIBS Company B*

Firm B was established in 2012. The investigated company is a small KIBS organization with 35 employees, a flat hierarchy, and flexible work processes, which avoids unnecessary structures and formal procedures. It provides consultancy primarily in the area of digital marketing and PR. The firm's website states as essential organizational values: the opportunities for continuous learning, the friendly organizational culture, and its openness to flexible working arrangements. According to the four associates, the company encourages a genial organizational culture. New employees benefit from hands-on assistance from a 'task force' comprising members across the organization. At the same time, such an environment allows for quickly transferring valuable information. In addition, such exchanges encourage informal knowledge sharing. These processes facilitate new staff's fast integration and equip them with the necessary knowledge to quickly become productive.

Knowledge management in the company is the primary responsibility of the heads of departments since various departments manage specific types of knowledge. At the

organizational level, the associates nurture the overall KM activities. Even though the associates and the heads of departments are in charge of or oversee a variety of knowledge processes like knowledge identification, acquisition, documentation, storage, sharing, and application, whenever knowledge gaps or opportunities to fill them are detected, the employees can also contribute new information, ideas, and proposals. Creative initiatives are welcome. They are tested and implemented if successful and seen as learning opportunities for the entire organization, too. As stated by one of the co-founders, "We do not normally impose specific ways of doing things, as long as the results are as expected. Individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their work".

The acquired knowledge is then shared openly among the staff members. The other co-founder stressed that KM-related difficulties are much less related to knowledge identification but more to developing soft skills and person-to-person communication. The organizational culture promotes collaboration to stimulate the employees to share relevant knowledge. The staff members help each other and constantly inquire how they could improve things. Consequently, people share even more profound knowledge and insights to benefit the common organizational objectives, despite the usual reservations in their sector in such cases.

When applying knowledge, criticizing other people's ideas during discussions is discouraged, and open-mindedness is encouraged. There are instances when some employees cannot absorb new knowledge or break up with routines quickly. Even in those cases, the leadership avoids exerting too much pressure as long as the targets are reached.

As a result of the acquired data, company B promotes an organizational culture that is open, flexible, and inclusive. At the same time, the organizational culture allows informal knowledge sharing and integration. Furthermore, this supportive cultural framework stimulates staff engagement in knowledge creation and application. It could be concluded that the company endorses practices valued in the clan model but go further towards an adhocracy model, which has staff development and well-being at the core. The associates can thus see the advantages of KM practices "reflected in the staff and organizational growth, as well as in client retention".

### *KIBS Company C*

KIBS Company C was founded in 2015 by a Romanian entrepreneur and has only one associate, the founder being the firm's owner. It is presented as a Software Engineering company that provides IT services, covering the entire software development circle, from defining the idea, to implementation and maintenance, and support. The company is industry agnostic and has experience and expertise in various fields, such as healthcare, retail, fintech, food tech, pharma, etc. The organization employs the latest technologies to deliver high-quality services to its most international partners. The company has a flat organizational structure, with departments working with each other and the power of the team being the scaling instrument. With a 40% growth year to year, the firm is considered one of Romania's fastest-growing IT companies.

KIBS C develops custom solutions and provides professional coverage of the full application lifecycle (planning, design, development, testing, deployment, and

maintenance). The company is at the forefront of software innovation, implementing projects with a versatile technology stack in a continuous expansion, within the latest trends, most suitable for the client's systems and business models. Innovative custom solutions include: robo-advisory fintech applications, mobile healthcare applications, business intelligence applications and data warehouse, real-time API (application programming interface) for self-care banking channels, mobile applications that integrate state of the art image and video processing algorithms.

The organizational culture is one of the main differentiators of the present company, along with its top-quality services and expertise in software development. The vision is to be a community shaping global Software Engineering by being a partner of choice for its customers and its people. As stated on the website, the core of the culture lies in its values: professional, partner of choice, authentic, and team. The company encourages an intrapreneurial component, where people can design their roles and participate in different projects and initiatives to promote lifelong learning and development. The company supports a nomad way of working, encouraging people to work from anywhere by offering flexibility, trust, and accountability.

Knowledge sharing was definitely the area all four interviewees were the most excited about. Even though the KIBS C doesn't possess a clear knowledge-sharing strategy, many instruments, tools, and processes are in place to ensure the knowledge dynamics transformations. This can be noticed in the benefits that one interviewee mentioned when talking about the importance of knowledge sharing "We use several methods as it is very crucial: an important element is the monthly meeting with all people where we bring relevant input for the respective month about projects, business, we share information from all knowledge categories; we also have various specific methods, such as <<meet our projects>> in which our colleagues can present specific details about the implementation of a certain project. Also, we have different communities that facilitate access to information at the team level". The knowledge-sharing process takes place both within the same teams, "very naturally", and across teams, when the company still tries to find the right instruments to facilitate it, as "it is a very qualitative process, not quantitative".

It has become clear after all four interviews that the most important and prominent challenge of the organization KIBS C is the accelerated growth and the process of scaling. "We register 40% growth year to year". The main focus of top management is to find ways to keep the people-oriented culture in place without losing its essence with more and more people coming into the organization. Organizational culture is considered to be "one of our most important competitive advantages" hence much time is invested in creating a new context for knowledge sharing as "what worked for an organization seven years ago might not work for now" and "Growing from 100 to 200 people in a year which came with transformational effects on how we are doing things" as stated by the respondents.

Accelerated growth and scaling up organization culture without diluting it are important challenges for the KIBS C. Still, they are perceived as important sources of innovation and opportunities. From a KM perspective, rational knowledge is transformed into emotional and spiritual knowledge, as people's mindset is oriented towards growth and positive impact rather than concern or uncertainty regarding how the organization will look in the following years. A clear goal is defined, namely reaching 1000 people by

2025. Using non-linear thinking to promote innovation and positive change can further the organization, providing that KIBS C will have more structure and a clear strategy for KM practices. This company develops an organizational culture that appears to put staff development and well-being at the center, embracing the adhocracy model.

## Conclusions

For KIBS A, the research findings reveal that knowledge is a critical asset, and a significant part of the company's OC revolves around integrating knowledge within the company. Following the same approach, KIBS C confirmed the importance of KM practices scaling up organizational culture and facing accelerated growth for an extended period of time. Using non-linear thinking and promoting innovation within the organization has proved to be important factors that help the KIBS C to evolve over the years and preserve its organizational culture elements. Overall, the organizational culture in KIBS company B nurtures open communication and collaboration, which are conducive to knowledge integration.

Per Cameron and Quinn's (2011) framework, it can be concluded that the investigated KIBS favors two types of organizational culture: the clan model, which stimulates cohesion, collaboration, and engagement, as well as the adhocracy model, which provides opportunities for the employees' development and well-being.

## *Implications*

Organisational culture proves to be a significant aspect in supporting the definition of KM strategy in organizations and a helpful instrument in implementing the strategy. A healthy organizational culture enables knowledge acquisition and sharing, promoting innovation, encouraging new working methods, and challenging the status quo. Hence, top managers should promote organizational culture models that support staff cohesion, engagement, development, and well-being. In addition, the analysis reveals that organizational culture creates the context for knowledge transformation, offering people the opportunity to employ rational, spiritual, and emotional knowledge and consequently nurture performance and growth.

## *Limitations*

The research findings reflect the practices in the Romanian KIBS sector and cannot be generalized, considering the limited number of participating companies and managers. Further research could attempt to involve more companies and interviewees.

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