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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE SYSTEM OF "E-GOVERNMENT" AS A TOOL FOR INCREASING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE STATE Aizhan Tleuberdinova, Yekaterina Brickaya	5
THE EXPERIENCES OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN THE ITALIAN MEDIUM-SIZE CITY Anna Maria Pascale, Maria Carmela Serluca	16
CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) AND ONLINE MARKETING: CROSS CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF U.S. AND CHINESE WEBSITES Carolynn McMahan, Jae Hee Park	23
INNOVATIVE USE OF KNOWLEDGE FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT Peter Sharp, Ursula Schinzel	32
ANALYZING THE EFFECTS OF BEHAVIORAL CONTROL ON CONSUMER OVER-INDEBTEDNESS Dajana Cvrilje, Tomislav Coric	43
INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTS OF UNIVERSITIES KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER OFFICE RESPONSIBILITY IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATIONS Irene Martín Rubio, Diego Andina	51
ANALYSIS OF BROADCASTING MARKET COMPETITION POLICY IN THAILAND Monwipa Wongrujira	59
INNOVATION CULTURE, HUMAN RESOURCE READINESS AND SERVICE EFFICIENCY: EVIDENCE FROM THE TRANSPORT BUSINESS IN THAILAND Rapheephan Phong-inwong	66
BUSINESS PROCESS MANAGEMENT APPLICATIONS IN THE ENTERPRISE THROUGH THE BIZAGI PROCESS MANAGEMENT SUITE Oskeol Gjoni	76

INNOVATIVE USE OF KNOWLEDGE FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains an innovative technique (Look Into your Future (LIFE) (Sharp, 2011)) for individuals to use their personal knowledge (through storytelling) to develop suitable personal development plans. The proposed approach is relevant to individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds. This paper presents and analyses qualitative data from 42 participants collected through questionnaires that explores specifically the role of storytelling in sharing personal knowledge relevant for personal development planning. This research endorses the view that personal storytelling is helpful for participants of different nationalities planning their future. It also suggests that it is easy for participants to do. The paper also provides insight in to the particular role of storytelling as a knowledge sharing approach that can help participants do this. This research also suggests that this is because personal storytelling helps people understand their past which helps them plan their future. It also helps people to realise more about themselves and their current situation and it helps them think, learn and develop. Finally, personal stories are authentic and relate to people. Arguably all these reasons are linked. Furthermore, people who articulate stories about their past can see patterns that help them create ideas for their future. Therefore, articulating thoughts in writing through reflection is a creative process and is an innovative way of using personal knowledge.

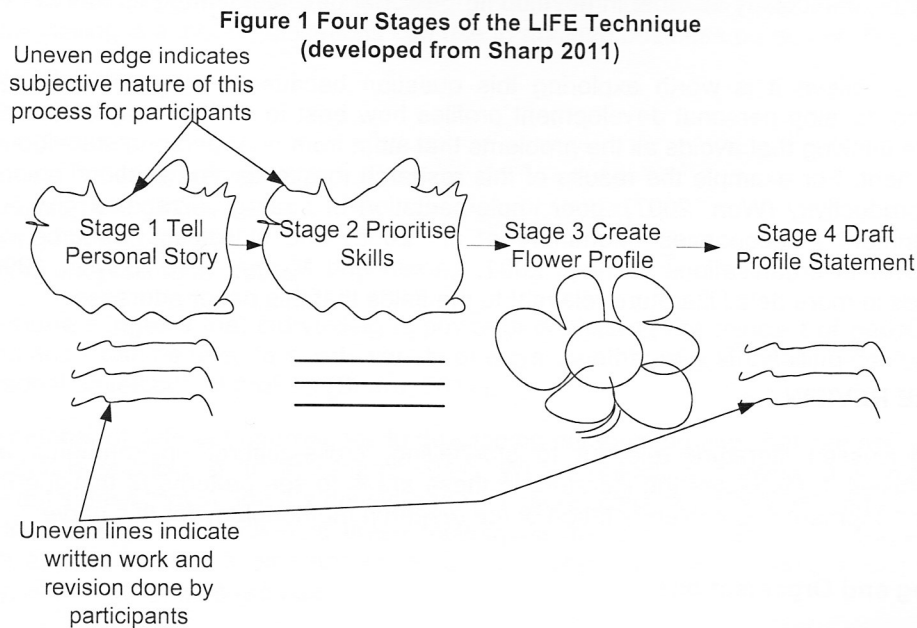
Keywords: Innovation, Knowledge Management, Personal Development Plan, Storytelling, Cross-Cultural

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is experiencing volatility in the employment patterns: while many are experiencing unemployment large numbers of people are simultaneously finding work that may or may not, suit their skills (Bolles, 2011). The initiative of understanding ourselves and devising personal development plans that suit our situation, level of experience, skills and personal preferences is critical for people from all nations. Whatever economic situation people find themselves in, arguably, their initiative is what generates enterprise and work opportunities. However, how should individuals and groups of people from different cultural backgrounds do this effectively? This paper reviews previous theory and practise that suggests that storytelling has been found to be useful in developing personal development plans. The paper also presents new research which seeks to check whether the previous research in this area is reliable and go on to explore why this may be the case. The authors believe that this is important because the more that is understood about how people can effectively devise personal development plans the more enterprising people will be in nurturing areas of activity that suit them. Also, understanding more about how people think is always significant for individual and corporate learning.

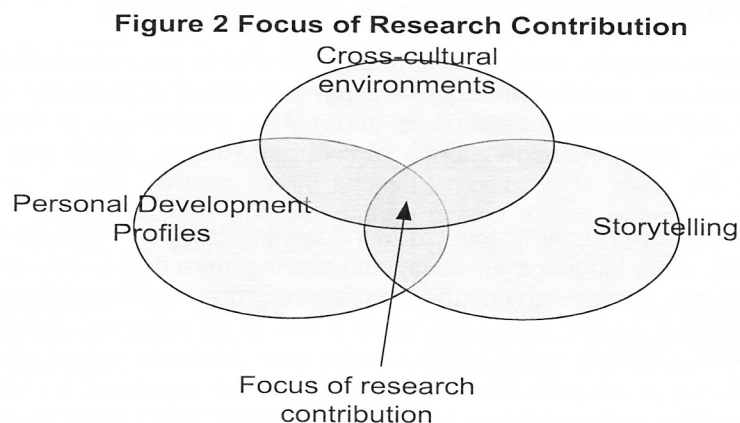
The question that gives a focus for this research is: why do personal stories help develop effective life development goals in cross-cultural environments? The development of effective life development goals is important for employees and organisations they work in (Sharp, 2011) and understanding how to develop these goals in the best possible way is also significant. Effective personal development goals are important for a number of reasons. These include increased job satisfaction. Where employees find a good match for their skills and personalities in the organisation in which they work, they are normally more motivated. Ultimately, on a larger scale, economies of countries are affected if people apply their skills effectively and work in areas that suit them and in which they can develop strongly (Sharp, 2011).

Previous research shows that the development of life development goals can be done over a one to two hour period of time using the LIFE Technique (Sharp, 2011). This is a four stage process which is summarised in Figure 1 below.



This process has been successfully used by people from different cultural backgrounds (Sharp, 2011) and, so far, research suggests that it is valuable to produce personally tailored knowledge and skills profiles to help individuals plan their future (Sharp, 2011). It also shows that the LIFE Technique is a significant contribution in doing this effectively in a relatively short period of time. Instead of taking weeks, months or years to produce a personal development profile, it usually takes less than 2 hours. Also, participants find each stage useful for planning their future area of work and find it is easy to do (Sharp, 2011).

The particular focus of this paper takes this research further by exploring the research question: *why* do personal stories help develop effective life development goals in a cross-cultural environment? This research provides a contribution at the intersection of the fields of personal life planning profiles and storytelling (see Figure 2).



It is valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, as far as the researchers are aware there has not been research in this particular field before. Secondly, although there is literature on the *use* and *value* of storytelling in different cultures and on *personal development* thinking (see Section 2), the reasons why

storytelling may be particularly suitable in developing personal development goals has not been focused on before.

The researchers believe it is worth exploring this question because it may inform researchers and practitioners who develop personal development profiles how best to do it. It may also provide insights that help nurture thinking that avoids all the problems that stem from poor personal development planning and work alignment. For example the results of this research may help organisations avoid consequent pitfalls of low productivity (Wan, 2007), poor implementation of strategy (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990), poor skills alignment in economies (Mohamud *et al.*, 2006) and significant resource waste due to employee turnover in organisations (Sveiby, 2001; Larsen and Myers, 1999; Boyce, 1996). The next section examines in more detail literature relevant to the fields that this paper addresses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section discusses literature relevant to storytelling, cross-cultural environments and personal development profiles. It discusses the literature in these areas to see patterns of thinking that provide a backdrop for development and implementation of the research methodology for this paper.

2.1. Storytelling and Organisations

Historically, in ancient cultures, the earliest forms of storytelling were mostly oral whereby people shared religious rituals and traditions. People in ancient cultures also shared their stories pictorially in drawing and painting on rocks and it has been argued that many of these stories were fairytales, legends, fables and myths (Lord, 2000; Price, 1978).

Contemporary storytelling is sometimes saved digitally and online, and used in organisations to transfer knowledge in the workplace (Swap *et al.*, 2001). Today, storytelling is undergoing a revival in organisations and indigenous societies, such as Kenya in Africa, where young people learn stories from elders (Kahumba, 2012). Also, storytelling is used in formal education environments as an effective educational tool (Rossiter, 2002) and as an instructional method (Andrews and Hull, 2009).

Much information is transferred both formally and informally when people share stories in different contexts such as mentoring, learning, and psychology (Salmon, 2010). Often, stories are used for knowledge discovery and development of communities (Doty, 2003). They are also used to share experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

2.2. Uses of Storytelling in Organisations including Personal Development

Storytelling is used in organisations for many different purposes. These purposes include communicating complex ideas, solving problems, decision-making, planning, and stating organisation norms, values and culture (Boyce, 1996; Gill, 2001; Denning, 2002; Boje, 2008). Also, intentionally or not, storytelling helps disseminate knowledge (Gill, 2001), manage change (Brown and Rhodes, 2005) and focus on a vision (McLellan, 2002).

In business, storytelling is used in Human Resource Management (Wilkins, 1984), to communicate in a richer way (Gargiulo, 2006), using language efficiently and sharing more than purely dry facts (Jameson, 2001). Also, it is used to resolve and manage conflicts, face challenges, and to lead effectively (Friedman, 2009). In marketing, storytelling is used in advertising as a way to be more entertaining, illustrative and memorable than other techniques and some argue it helps build customer loyalty (Lury, 2004; Huang, 2009; Denning, 2011). Stories in advertisements may build stronger emotional bonds and in business they can be used to interpret the past and shape the future (Jameson, 2001). Some argue that storytelling can be used to achieve success (Hensel, 2010).

Storytelling can be used as a way of reflecting on the past to project organisational thinking in to the future (Denning, 2004). Denning (2004) argues that if this is to be effective, the story needs to be true,

have a positive ending and include a minimum of detail. Denning (2006) and Harris and Barnes (2005) argue that storytelling is a tool organisations can use to achieve business purposes. These include:

- sparking action;
- communicating identity;
- sharing values;
- branding fostering collaboration;
- influencing the grapevine;
- sharing knowledge and
- leading people into the future.

In short, literature suggests that storytelling is powerful in shaping the mindset of people in and outside organisations and it can be used in a wide variety of ways. Another way storytelling can be used is to help develop personal development profiles (Sharp, 2011).

There are a number of different approaches to developing personal profiles that can help people identify a career path that is suitable for them (Sharp, 2011). Where reflection is involved in this, it may include sharing relevant stories that inform the development of future plans. A number of techniques use personal storytelling in this way. A selection of these techniques are summarised and categorised in Table 1 below. Each approach takes a different length of time. The time each technique can take may affect which, if any, of the techniques are used.

Each of these techniques begins with the individual's viewpoint rather than organisations' needs.

TABLE 1. PERSONAL PLANNING PROFILING TECHNIQUES FOR FUTURE CAREER PLANNING WHICH USE STORYTELLING

	Approach	Aim of Approach	Summary of how it works	Time of Technique
1	Personal Story Telling (Clare, 2003)*	To openly think about life and what next.	To reflect openly on life and through open discussion.	1 day or more
2	Continual Professional Development (CPD) and Personal Coaching (e.g. Eales-White, 2002)*	To help clarify future career paths of individuals.	Usually a mixture of meetings with a personal coach and work within a CPD structure of an organisation.	From hours to potentially a life time.
3	Career Counselling (e.g. Baruch, 1999)*	To help clarify future career paths for individuals.	Meeting between career counsellor and an individual to generate profile.	From hours to weeks.
4	Career Development workshops (e.g. Stevens, 1996)*	To plan next career steps.	Reflection time, self-assessment and exploration and draft profile options.	Normally a minimum of several hours.
5	Look In to your FuturE (LIFE) Technique (Sharp, 2011)*	To help clarify future career and life paths of individuals.	Process of 4 steps which begins with a reflection on personal success stories.	Between one and two hours.
6	Situation Task Action Result (STAR) stories for Interview Preparation	To prepare for job interviews.	Structured storytelling technique to prepare for job interviews.	One story may take about 20 minutes to record.
* With these approaches, usually a number of steps are applied in combination.				

Arguably organisations and individuals should be seeking to find a good match between what the organisation needs and the work that individuals within it identify in their personal development plan (Sharp, 2011). Whether organisations or individuals (or both) use such techniques or not may depend on their knowledge of them, the time they take, and the relative attractiveness of the techniques to them.

However, techniques that use stories to help individuals reflect and develop personal development plans are suitable for individuals from different cultures around the world (Sharp, 2011). The authors believe it is worth considering why this may be the case. The next two sub-sections consider literature that set a framework for the collection and analysis of primary data presented later in this paper.

2.3. Storytelling and Cross-cultural Environments

Culture is defined as the collective programming of the mind, something that forms in people's minds through the influence of family, neighbourhood, school, youth groups, workplace and living community (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). It manifests itself in symbols, heroes, rituals and values, gestures, pictures and objects (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Cultures develop in nations, communities and organisations (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010) and stories carry data, symbols and language (Sinclair, 2005). Therefore, arguably, stories are culturally loaded.

Differences in national and organisational cultures present challenges and opportunities for organisations (Schein, 2009; Minkov, 2011; Mintzberg, 2011). There is a wide variety of issues relating to culture that have been explored in literature from a number of different authors and angles. The thinking in the area is potentially confusing and challenging for organisations. Broadly speaking, literature on cultural issues in organisations addresses issues such as:

- the attitude and motivation to work influenced by different values and needs (Herzberg *et al.*, 1959; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; McClelland, 1961; Maslow, 1970; Rockeach, 1971; 1979);
- understanding and categorising cultural differences and their impact on working relationships (Hall, 1976; Hall and Hall, 1990; Trompenaars and Hamden-Turner, 1997; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede *et al.*, 2010);
- leading, communicating and cooperating in multi-cultural situations (House *et al.*, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Minkov and Hofstede, 2011);
- marketing and consumer motivation (Briley and Aaker, 2006; Nakata, 2009; De Mooij, 2011);
- working in individualistic or collectivistic societies (Schwartz, 1990; Triandis, 1995);
- implementation of acquisitions and mergers (Schein, 2009);
- managing teams and organisations (Banai, 2010/11; Mintzberg, 2011);
- training staff (Hofstede, 2009);
- human resource management (Scholz and Böhm, 2008);
- bringing global perspectives to organisations (Hermans and Kempen, 1998);
- addressing socio-economic and sustainable development challenges in the world (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Leung *et al.*, 2011);
- communication between bi-cultural and bi-lingual people (Hong *et al.*, 2000; Briley *et al.*, 2005);
- globalisation and political change in the Eastern Countries (De Lorenzo *et al.*, 2009) and
- happiness (Myers and Diener, 1995; Diener, 2000; Aaker and Smith, 2010), and happiness combined with wealth (Hagerty and Veenhoven, 2003).

The complexity and variety of issues that arise from challenges relating to cultural issues can have enormous impact on the management of human resources. Research has been conducted to investigate understanding these issues with the aim of avoiding expensive mistakes in human resource management (Scholz and Böhm, 2008). Storytelling may be one way to address some of these challenges in the area of personal development planning.

2.4. Why Storytelling may Help Personal Development Planning

There are a number of possible reasons why people from different cultures may consider storytelling helpful in developing personal development plans. It can help share ideas among people of different ages, for example about scientific topics like conservation (Kahumba, 2012). Storytelling can help younger generations to learn and can give them inspiration and change attitudes (Kahumba, 2012). Therefore, arguably it can help inspire people when they think about their personal development plans. Also, storytelling can help people to communicate quickly, naturally and clearly (Denning, 2001; Brown

and Rhodes, 2005) and see it as a powerful means of generating commitment (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993). Also, if stories are more easily remembered (Heath and Heath, 2008) then if used in personal development, the experience of thinking through ideas using stories, may have more personal impact and be remembered more easily.

Storytelling has also been found to benefit people in helping them to learn (Rossiter, 2002; Davidson, 2004), solve problems, foster future ambitions when shared (Denning, 2000), inspire innovation, job satisfaction and customer satisfaction (Denning, 2010). Also, storytelling can help in marketing (Lury, 2004) and persuade, motivate and inspire (Salmon, 2007). Stories can be fun (Armstrong, 1992), help generate commitment (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993), share complex meaning (Scholtz, 2003), and can motivate people in a way that engages their emotions (James and Minnis, 2004). Snowden (1999, 2000) notes that stories help capture tacit knowledge and can embed lessons within them and help share knowledge in diverse groups of people. All these aspects of storytelling arguably apply to personal development thinking. People learn through experience and can use this experience to address problems in planning their future and articulating future ambitions. They may need to think creatively to impact their own future and find job satisfaction that matches with their own motivations. Arguably, they need to grapple with personally complex histories and think through their commitment in a way that engages emotions, and arguably these are issues that apply across different people groups. The rest of this paper explains how primary data was obtained and discusses results of this work in light of the literature.

3. METHODOLOGY

The LIFE Technique ('the Technique') was implemented in one-to-one meetings in the period 2009 to 2012. Some participants were willing participants from industry seeking some personal development advice. However, the majority of the meetings were conducted within a series of 5 workshops with postgraduate international students in the first semester of their MA programme at a postgraduate business school in the UK over a period of 3 years (from 2010 to 2012 inclusive). Each workshop included more than 10 participants. The four stages of the Technique (see Figure 1) were implemented in these meetings. In the first stage participants shared stories from their past with each other according the guidelines within the Technique (Sharp, 2011). This process was facilitated by one of the authors. In total there were 112 participants who took part in such meetings. Participants came from over 17 different nationalities. Most of the nationalities were represented by a small number of participants (between 1 and 3) in each workshop and so the participants provided a good 'spread' of nationalities. The nationality which was most heavily represented was India. In the last two workshops (total of 42 participants) the following question was posed at the end of the questionnaire about the Technique:- one aspect of the LIFE project is the use of personal stories to reflect on individuals' lives and help plan ahead. Past research has found that personal stories help individuals reflect and plan ahead. *Why do you think* personal stories may help develop effective LIFE development goals? The authors included this question to give participants the opportunity to give their views on why storytelling may be helpful for personal development planning.

4. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY DATA

The findings from the 42 participants in the final two workshops endorsed the pattern of findings from the previous 70 participants that which suggests that the Technique is a useful process for producing personally tailored profiles for future planning and that participants find it is easy to do (Sharp and Schinzel, 2013; Sharp, 2011).

Qualitative feedback was obtained from the 42 participants from the last two workshops which addressed the question at the heart of this research (see **Section 3**). 40 out of the 42 participants answered the question. The qualitative feedback was tabulated and analysed to identify key themes which were summarised (see Table 2 overleaf).

The results illustrate that seven participants said personal storytelling links the past to guiding the future and four noted that it helps determine goals and/or set benchmarks. 10 participants said that it helped

them realise more about themselves and their situation. Seven participants said it helps them to think, learn or grasp new ideas. Another five participants said storytelling is authentic and relates to them and in some way it is helpful to think of examples. There is no clear picture of how any of these themes relate to

TABLE 2 PATTERNS FROM PRIMARY DATA OF WHY PERSONAL STORIES HELP PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Categories that Summarise Why Storytelling Helps - Grouped into Broad Categories in Bold Italic	Identity Numbers of Participants	Nationalities
<i>Past Helping Plan Future</i>		
Past makes us and Guides Future	10, 14, 15, 25, 27, 28, 29	Thai, Thai, Thai, Kazakh, Indian, British, British
Helps set goals	26, 30, 35	Indian, Indian, Norwegian
Benchmarks	12	Russian
<i>Realise About Yourself and Situation</i>		
Realise successes, fortune and abilities	6, 8, 24, 29	Indian, Canadian/Lebanese, Indian, British
Identify personal values, strengths, experiences, desires, needs, interests	7, 30, 37	Indonesian, Indian, Indian
Awareness / know about self	2, 14	Serbian, Thai
Identify why we are here now	35	Norwegian
Confidence, motivation	22, 27, 40	Thai, Indian, Russian
<i>Thinking, Learning and Developing</i>		
Thinking and Learning	4, 5, 23, 29, 39	Nigerian, Indian, Italian, British, Turkish
Helps develop us	20	Thai
Grasp new ideas	27	Indian
<i>Authentic and Relates to Us</i>		
Example	21, 40	Thai, Russian
Relates to us	13, 27	Taiwanese, Indian
Real / Authentic	12	Russian
Compare with others	8	Canadian/ Lebanese

any particular nationality of the participants. However, the past guiding the future is mentioned more by Thai nationals than any other nationality. Arguably, all of the themes identified and grouped could be linked. For example, when you really understand yourself and your situation it can help you think and learn from your past to help you plan for the future.

5. CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the question: why do personal stories help develop effective life development goals in cross-cultural environments? This question rests on an assumption that personal storytelling *does* help develop effective life development goals (Sharp, 2011). This research shows that the reasons why storytelling is helpful for people from a variety of cultures vary but they can be grouped into four main categories. One, it helps understand the past which then helps to plan the future. Two, it helps people to realise more about themselves and their current situation. Three, it helps people to think, learn and develop. Finally, personal stories are authentic and relate to people. Arguably all these reasons may be linked. In short, this research endorses the view that when a person looks back in their life it helps them in the creative process of planning for the future. People who articulate stories about their past can see patterns that help them create ideas for their future. Articulating thoughts in writing through reflection is a creative process and is an innovative way of using personal knowledge. This research provides insights into personal development that are strategically significant for organisations seeking to maximise the

benefit of their current and future workforce. On the basis of this research the authors argue that organisations should harness storytelling for their strategic advantage.

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