Book review

International HRM: A Cross-Cultural Approach,
T. Jackson, Sage, 2002, 292 pp
The Global Challenge: International Human Resource Management,
P. Evans, V. Pucik, J.-L. Barsoux, McGrawHill, 2002, paperback, 331 pp

Whither big business in 2002? What are the latest ways of managing its assets? How are we to manage its human systems and HRM?

There is little doubt that we are now in a major global economic crisis as stock markets unwind and the reputation of formerly "blue-chip" MNCs plummets. Along with the Enrons of this world, giant corporations are now under heavy fire and are once again on the defensive. MNCs are genuinely worried about where to turn. As we speak, more than a few multi-million businesses have started to call themselves "international" again rather than "global". This is not in the least surprising.

Terence Jackson's new book on *International HRM* is a "good buy" for students. Jackson teaches at the ESCP-Eap European Business School based in Oxford. He writes with authority as well as clarity and knows the HRM field in depth. The cross-cultural approach he takes is spot on for the readership he seeks. He covers the essentials plus the American, British, Dutch, Japanese and other HRM models that fit his brief. I would recommend this book at both undergraduate and graduate levels as a good introduction to the subject.

"*The Global Challenge*", a hefty new text by Professors Paul Evans, Vladimir Pucik and Jean-Louis Barsoux, all well-known masters of the art, has an [early] 2002 imprint. It is an impressive looking tome, well produced and full of promising material. It is also in paperback. Teaching at INSEAD and IMD, the authors are both well known and authoritative. They know about as much as anyone alive can know about human resources. Their text deals with the strategies and structures of International HRM with great confidence and aplomb. Much can be said in its favour. It is a work aimed directly at the MBA market and it does its job well.

As an uptodate "big" book on the human resource topics graduates need to know, it is very "solid". By and large, I can find little to fault with the curricular essentials of the text. It does its job in ten chapters that cover the main themes in an MBA course. It is truly international in its scale and scope. The text is a very comprehensive one and deals with its material at a truly graduate level. All the "usual suspects" are there, from "global alliances" to "network coordination" and "knowledge management", with the appropriate HR techniques to develop and nurture talent to run these giants thrown in. This is no easy task in an increasingly complex and turbulent economic environment.

However, may I enter a caveat here: - the keen optimism about such fortresses of "big business", at least as expressed by the authors and their belief in "global leadership" may, for instance, elicit a less than enthusiastic response from their academic critics, not to speak of shareholders dis-possessed of the net asset worth and those "down-sized" from such MNCs in the recent economic crisis. The trouble with writing MBA texts is that you have to run to stand still. We live in "interesting times" as the Chinese would put it.

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Cultivating Communities of Practice, Wenger, E., McDermott, R. and Snyder, W.M., Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts, USA, 2002, 359 pp. US$29.95, ISBN: 1-57851-330-8

Unlike the earlier book "*Communities of Practice*" (Wenger, E. 1998, Cambridge University Press), which offers a conceptual description of the nature and elements of communities of practice, this book adopts a practitioner's approach to depict the development of this community in practical sense. It is suitable for managers and practitioners to use as a roadmap to realize the benefits of having Communities of Practice.

This book consists of ten chapters. The first three chapters serve the purpose of recapturing the importance of knowledge in face of the globalized economy, and the knowledge-creation ability of Communities of Practice (COPs). Chapter 1 recalls the ontology of knowledge and describes the potential of COPs to gen-

erate various kinds of knowledge. Chapter 2 touches upon the traits of COPs like size, longevity, location, membership, boundaries, objectives of formation, and its positioning in organization. It describes the three elements of COP in details, namely domain, community, and practice, and distinguishes COP from other structures possibly found in an organization. Chapter 3 offers the seven principles involved in the design of COPs, and notes its dynamic nature.

Chapters 4 and 5 are employed to outline the five stages of a COP's life-cycle. One, the "Potential" stage demands community coordinators' presence to define the domain of a COP, and recruit appropriate members. Two, the "Coalesce" stage addresses the need of strengthening and energizing a newborn COP in face of the pressure its members will be facing, thereby increasing its chance of survival. Three, during the "Maturing" stage, core members of COPs are likely to encounter many newly jointed members whose presence "forces" the former to re-define the value of the COP and the members' roles, giving rise to a fragile position of this COP. Four, the "Stewardship" stage pinpoints how to sustain a COP's momentum by balancing the ownership jointly promoted and shared by existing members, and the need of granting openness to new people's admission. Five, the "Transformation" stage explains the possible termination, disintegration, or institutionalization of COPs.

Chapter 6 extends the concept of COP to a broader context. Distributed Communities is one form of COP in which the interaction of their members is subject to the barriers of distance, affiliation, and culture differences. It sheds light on the methods to reconcile the differences, say, by strengthening the trust between members.

Chapter 7 reminds that COP is not always a panacea. It does have its potential downside emerged from the COP's organization or the COP *per se.* The chapter concludes that members of COPs cannot but have to live with the downside problems, and nourish their COPs in a fine-tuning fashion.

Chapter 8 contributes by advising that COP cannot be measured and managed in conventional ways. Both informal and formal phenomena should be noted. It identifies story-telling among members as an effective means to describe how knowledge sources are produced and applied. The best way to measure the value of knowledge is to see how it affects business processes. For managing performance, recognition is the preferred means vis-à-vis financial incentive.

Chapter 9 captures the essential initiatives to cultivate communities-based knowledge. To do this the

organization also needs to review its existing structure and culture, and renders a good interplay between formal and informal means. This exercise will be most facilitated in presence of both a "support team" and a "coordinating team" working in an "educational process". Also important is the presence of stakeholders' blessing.

Chapter 10 seeks to extend the theory of COP from organization or business arenas to regional, national, or even global context.

In sum, this book reaffirms the knowledge generation facet of COP from a practical vantage point. Seeing through the lens of a Chief Knowledge Officer, it explains the crucial tasks involved in developing, sustaining, and transforming a COP. It resorts to a handful of business examples to illustrate the essential elements and processes embedded in a COP, the soft skills of implementing a COP, and the favorable environment for COP.

The book also reinforces that the philosophy of a COP is its ability to generate knowledge dynamically through informal networking of stakeholders who are committed to sharing common practical foci and devising solutions from their interaction. As named, this book focuses on cultivation of COPs. Setting out the process of cultivating COP in business world, this book extends this concept to other segments like supplier network, customer network, and civic environment. For instance, it explains the benefits of forming a COP by political actors.

This book helps direct practitioners' focus to the social means of knowledge acquisition and distribution in current business environment and even in global context. Against the backdrop of organizational learning, COP has drawn significant attention. However, much of the literature, including this book (see Chapter 6), only slightly touches upon COP in a cross-culture context. The book would further contribute to the field of social theory of learning if it could throw light on how to overcome cultural differences in COPs, especially in consideration of the increasingly globalized economy.

Thus far, the concept of COP centers upon informal means of knowledge creation. This book has encouraged spiritually and strategically a systematic implementation of the COP. It seems that the authors endeavor to formalize such informal learning process, although they express that it is not the intention of the book. Instead, they believe that by legitimizing COP practitioners and academics can sharpen their foci to implement COP in a strategic way. Then, should the concept of COP become official in organization? If the

answer is "yes", it is likely that existing COPs become on the spot and subject to great pressure to deliver results. Would it defeat the enjoyable and interest-driven nature of COP that scholars have advocated so far? We expect more insight from the authors.

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