

APPLYING META-ABILITIES TO OUTSOURCING: AN INDIVIDUAL BASED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

*To cope with the current turbulent times, organisations' are seeking a range of solutions and one of the most publicised strategies for this in recent times is outsourcing. In the Information Systems (IS) area, outsourcing has fast become an essential part of an organisation's IS strategy. By signing outsourcing agreements, firms expect to reduce their overall Information Technology (IT) costs, focus on their core competencies, and gain superior technical resources. This paper offers a **conceptual model** for the area of outsourcing, which is based primarily on meta-abilities. **Keywords:** Outsourcing, Meta-abilities, IS strategy*

1. Introduction

Organisations are facing turbulent times due to changes in economic conditions, globalisation and rapidly advancing technological advances (Stewart, 1997). To cope with these changes, organisations are seeking solutions and one of the most publicised strategies in recent times is outsourcing. Outsourcing is a complex term as it embodies several descriptions and generally refers to the relocation of jobs (Cubides, 2006). Essentially, outsourcing is the transfer of services or functions previously performed within the organisation to a provider outside of the organisation and are increasingly key components in many business strategies (Hern and Burke, 2006).

In the IS area, outsourcing has fast become an essential part of an organisation's IS strategy (Akomode et al., 1998) and is occurring on a vast scale with progression not envisaged to decline in the future. Forrester, for example, forecasted that European enterprises will spend over 128 billion on computer outsourcing in 2008 (Forrester, 2004) and the Gartner group has estimated that the worldwide IT outsourcing market will grow from US\$ 180.5 billion revenues in 2003 to US\$ 253.1 billion in 2008 at a compound annual growth rate of 7.2%. Some of the largest IS outsourcing providers are IBM, EDS, CSC, Hewlett Packard, Oracle, General Electric, and HSBC (Gartner, 2005).

Early research on IS outsourcing focused largely on the role of the contract and service level agreements in structuring and governing the client-provider relationship (e.g., Lacity and Willcocks, 1998). By signing outsourcing agreements, firms expect to reduce their overall IT costs, focus on their core competencies, and gain superior technical resources. Amongst the overall reasons for outsourcing, the one that has emerged as prime in recent years, is to gain competitive advantage through partnerships by sharing information and knowledge (Lee, 2001; McFarlan and Nolan, 1995). However, IT outsourcing has proved more difficult to manage than many firms expected (Lacity et al., 1998). This has led to more recent researchers considering the

role of non-contractual mechanisms such as trust and psychological contracts, which may be implemented at different moments during the inter-organisational relationship (e.g., Koh et al., 2004; Sabherwal, 1999; Willcocks and Kern, 1998; Davis, 1996).

This paper also applies the reasoning that outsourcing is not only focused only upon contractual issues but involves people as well. The people aspect that will be discussed in this paper is the issue of the process of tacit knowledge, which is deeply rooted in an individual's actions, experiences, ideals, values or emotions (Malhotra, 2004). Utilising such reasoning, this paper attempts to propose a **conceptual framework** that identifies and discusses the aforementioned issues and eases the process of developing individual-enabled outsourcing operational systems. In other words, the aim of this paper is to propose a conceptual framework that promotes partnership through sharing information and knowledge between outsourcers and outsourcees. To achieve this aim, this paper assumes that there are two main aspects to be considered; namely, the ability to externalise and share knowledge and skills, and self-documentation. These two aspects are emphasised as they can encourage employees to contribute inputs towards outsourcing operations and activities (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007).

To better understand the purpose of this paper, two research questions have been developed: *"How do we include individuals in the individual-enabled outsourcing operational system? Why use meta-abilities in order to include individuals in the individual-enabled outsourcing operational system?"*

In the aforementioned questions the concept of 'meta-abilities' has been proposed. This paper posits that the concept has been considered important for the development of employee confidence and a willingness to contribute inputs for IS development (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). The term 'meta-abilities' has been defined in various ways; however, for the purposes of this paper, 'meta-abilities' is a term that refers to personal attributes that underpin and determine 'how' and 'when' knowledge and skills will be used (Butcher et al., 1997). In general, meta-abilities are considered pertinent as these are higher level abilities obtained from knowledge and skills, which when combined with the experiences of individuals allows them to be much more effective than would otherwise be the case. In other words, this concept has the potential to increase an individual's creativity and interpretivity, which then impacts other areas of an organisation and overall, an organisation's performance (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007).

Practically, the use of meta-abilities in IT outsourcing is a novel idea. Nevertheless, meta-abilities have been used extensively in organisational development (Butcher et al., 1997) and IS development (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007) literature. In both areas, meta-abilities were considered pertinent for the development of staff members' confidence and when determining the willingness to participate in organisational development. In this paper, following Selamat and Choudrie (2007), meta-abilities are developed by using the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions and rational discourse. These elements are combined in a manner such that a novel framework is formed, which we intend to test in a real life setting using a case study approach.

The most important contribution of this paper is a 10 stages framework for the individual-enabled outsourcing project (OP). The framework encompasses the critical issues to externalise, share, document and embed tacit knowledge in the outsourcing operating system. Through this process, an organisation can continuously improve its daily outsourcing operations and activities. This, in turn, can reduce the operational cost of that organisation. Therefore, the organisation can consider the framework of this paper to get the first view of how to develop individual-enabled OP.

The paper begins by offering an examination of the main concept of meta-abilities in the organisational development and management literature. The IS, management and organisational development literature is then surveyed for specific guidance in relation to tacit knowledge externalisation, OP and meta-abilities. The section also develops and presents a framework synthesizing the previous research. This is followed by the section that examines the implications of the framework on the outsourcing area. The paper then draws to a close with the conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. Conceptual Background

The conceptual background for our 10 stages framework (see 2.5) is presented in sections 2.1-2.5 below.

2.1 Outsourcing project development has to start with the individual

There is a growing realisation that often human issues are a substantial, if not the primary, factors for IS failure (Buchanan, 1991; Ewusi-Mensah and Przasnyski, 1994; Doherty and King, 1998). This issue has started crippling into the IT outsourcing area (Lacity et al., 1998). The main reason for this occurrence is that forces in the contemporary business environment and the consequent emergence of new organisational forms develop an individuals' self-conscious to re-order, to re-arrange and to redesign an IS (Bell, 1999). In other words rapid changes in the environment will transform organisational members' tacit knowledge and as a consequence change their perception and judgement on the role of IS/IT.

Tacit knowledge is an individual's intuition, beliefs, assumptions and values, formed as a result of experience (Saint-Onge, 1996). Augier and Vendelo (1999) argued that due to its transparent and subjective nature tacit knowledge is not easily externalised. Difficulties appear when expressing or documenting knowledge that appears obvious and natural to one (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000). Further, the difficulties in externalising and sharing of tacit knowledge are also linked to language, time, values and distance (Haldin-Herrgard, 2000). Alternatively, there are factors that prevent individuals from sharing their tacit knowledge or seeking clarification from colleagues and peers, including the lack of confidence, anxiety, unwillingness, confusion, and being carried away by strong feelings (Harvey and Butcher, 1998).

Generally, the above discussion identifies the main factors requiring consideration when attempting to continuously monitor outsourcing operations and activities. Therefore, in order to obtain inputs from employees an understanding of how to encourage individuals to externalise, share and document their tacit knowledge is imperative. To achieve this, this paper proposes the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions, rational discourse and meta-abilities in OP, which is discussed further in the next section.

2.2 Developing individuals for outsourcing projects

Understanding the ability to externalise, share and document tacit knowledge enables an organisation to undertake continuous development and consequently disseminate new insights for learning (Malhotra, 2004). This section presents an overview of the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions, rational discourse and meta-abilities that will be used as a means for developing employees' abilities to externalise, share and document tacit knowledge.

To develop an organisation, it has been suggested that competencies should be generic rather than organisation specific (Butcher et al., 1997). Additionally, competencies cannot be usefully specified in terms of neatly identifiable, observable or measurable behaviours (Butcher et al., 1997). Therefore, competencies should involve increasing self-knowledge and improving “meta-abilities” – those personal, acquired abilities which underpin and determine how and when knowledge and skills will be used (Butcher et al., 1997).

Butcher et al. (1997) found that there are four meta-abilities that are critical in organisational development: (1) cognitive skills; (2) self-knowledge; (3) emotional resilience; and (4) personal drive. The description of each meta-ability is offered in Table 1.

Table 1. The description of meta-abilities

Meta-abilities	Description
Cognitive skills	Includes the ability to notice and interpret what is happening in interpersonal situations; to entertain multiple perspectives and integrate them; to envision strategic futures; and to sort and analyse data. These skills allow employees to “read situations, understand and resolve problems.”
Self-knowledge	Seeing oneself through another’s eyes, knowing one’s own motivations and values and distinguishing one’s own needs from those of others. These skills allow employees to consider a range of options in their own behaviour and to make better judgements of what to do. They allow other skills and knowledge to be used more flexibly.
Emotional resilience	Includes self-control and discipline; the ability to use emotion well to cope with pressure and adversity; and balance feelings about oneself. These skills allow employees the personal robustness to direct their energies, deal with intense situations and manage challenges healthily.
Personal drive	This involves self-motivation and determination, a willingness to take responsibility and risks. This helps employees to persist, motivate others and meet targets.

Source: Butcher et al. (1997)

As meta-abilities enable individuals to effectively use their tacit knowledge, it is argued that they are relevant for enabling tacit knowledge externalisation and sharing. Therefore, this paper utilises them as a basis in the conceptual framework.

However, meta-abilities do not develop on their own. The presence of various elements is required (Butcher et al., 1997). This paper proposes the following elements that are required to develop the above meta-abilities: (1) understanding organisational roles; (2) internal strengths; (3) formal and informal discussion and (4) rational discourse. These elements were selected as they are more focused upon developing the employees’ communication skills, assertiveness and dealing with conflict, persuading others and managing organisational politics, which are relevant to achieve the objective of this paper. To acquaint the reader to the elements, the definitions, descriptions and justifications of each element are provided in the following paragraphs.

Additionally, we argue that employees’ need to understand three fundamental aspects when working in organisations: (1) personal responsibility; (2) task priority and (3) personal targets (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). This understanding is essential as it promotes the judicious use of accumulated experience and is beneficial when considering outsourcing activities. Therefore, this understanding should be emphasised when developing effective OP frameworks.

Further, we propose that eight internal strengths should be instilled within employees’ in order to develop meta-abilities and thus establish an environment conducive for monitoring OP. These eight internal strengths were chosen as they enable the use of knowledge and skills in an effective manner.

The first internal strength proposed in this paper is personal confidence, which is defined by Harvey and Butcher (1998) as a self-belief in undertaking and accomplishing organisational tasks. As one of the elements that prevent staff members from externalising and sharing their tacit knowledge is lack of confidence (Harvey and Butcher, 1998), this element should be emphasised when understanding an OP framework. The second internal strength proposed in this paper is observing accepted organisational approaches. For this, staff members undertake tasks based upon “the right approach for the right situation” (Srikantiah and Koenig, 2000). As this internal strength promotes sharing information with and obtaining clarification from other parties (Karhu, 2002), it needs to be emphasised in managing outsourcing operations and activities. Therefore, this understanding should be emphasised when developing effective OP frameworks.

The third internal strength is identified as undertaking tasks with commitment and self-discipline. This is the backbone of enabling knowledge and skills utilisation amongst staff members and has the potential to enable outsourcing processes to thrive.

The fourth internal strength is recognised to be self-awareness. Self-awareness is defined as “an ability to determine the tasks that need to be accomplished at the current time and accomplish the determined tasks according to an accepted organisational approach” (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). These processes involve actively sharing and externalising knowledge and obtaining a clarification process from others.

The fifth identified internal strength is self-remembrance, which is “the value that requires staff members to attend to their actions when undertaking a task such that they can be accomplished effectively. Further, to remember that through their effective actions the company can achieve good profit and consequently give them a good salary and bonus” (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). The combination of these two values can motivate a person and others to work hard and smart. From this description, it can be seen that self-remembrance enables staff members to actively utilise their knowledge and skills in the process of decision making.

Compassion is viewed to be the sixth internal strength. In this paper, compassion is defined as having “a feeling that the whole organisation is like a family” (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). Each staff member should appreciate the other members’ efforts since all of them have the same aim and objective in terms of job security. Being equipped with this value, staff members can then trust each other and consequently neutralise the feeling that prevents them from sharing information with other members. This situation is critical in establishing an environment conducive for managing outsourcing activities and therefore needs to be considered in this paper.

The seventh identified internal strength is sincerity, defined as “undertaking tasks or avoiding risk actions for the sake of the company” (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). In other words, every employee must have a feeling that he/she works for the sake of the company and for fulfilling his/her responsibility to the company. It is argued that sincerity can motivate employees to work collectively and harmoniously in the workplace. This scenario is critical in managing outsourcing activities in the organisation and therefore should be emphasised in this paper.

An internal strength that is proposed in this paper is the willingness to change when an unexpected situation arises-‘innate flexibility’. This can occur due to rapid changes within the organisational and business environment. To prevent an organisation from losing its competitive edge, this process is necessary as a continuous improvement for it. This value is pertinent as willingness to change is related closely to OP.

When developing the meta-abilities an important element is the ability to conduct formal and informal discussions within the organisation. This is because staff members face various tasks in daily activities—routine, non-routine, official and unofficial (Malhotra, 2004). Formal approaches are procedures such as meetings, progress reports and performance evaluation reports. Within organisations there are also instances of ‘chats around the water fountains’ or ‘in the corridors’, which are also known as informal discussions. Other forms of informal approaches include, dialogue, face-to-face interaction, corridor meeting, lunch table chats and coffee/tea table chats. Through good communication, outsourcing improvement activities can be undertaken actively amongst staff members. Therefore, this organisational value should be emphasised in order to create an effective OP framework.

When considering the establishment of a platform in an individual’s mindset, particularly when monitoring outsourcing activities in an organisation, the presence of the elements of rational and irrational discourses is required. Rational and irrational discourses can legitimise the selection of a design ideal because they ensure that the arguments of all interested parties are heard, that the choice results in an informed consensus about the design ideal, and the formal value choice is made only by the force of the better argument (Klein and Hirschheim, 1996; Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). These values are critical for developing the above cognitive skills and self-knowledge. Additionally, they are able to promote active tacit knowledge externalisation and sharing amongst staff members, especially in meetings and dialogue. Therefore, rational and irrational discourses should be considered for establishing a platform in an individual’s mindset for managing OP in an organisation.

2.3 Enabling tacit knowledge externalisation

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it can be learnt that the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussion and rational discourse can assist in building a confident and responsible individual (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). These values, in turn, create three important competencies as follows: (a) influencing skills; (b) sharing attitudes; and (c) inquisitive tendencies (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). In other words, influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies are the third element of this paper conceptual framework.

It was also found in the earlier sections that there are problems when managing outsourcing activities, which is the need to develop an individual’s ability when externalising and sharing tacit knowledge. In such an instance, understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussion, rational discourse, meta-abilities, influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies are the humanistic elements that should be considered when considering means of overcoming the difficulties in externalising and sharing tacit knowledge. This is because by practicing the above influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies, individuals can generate creative ideas (I), actions (A), reactions (R) and reflections (R) (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). The terms ideas, actions, reactions and reflections represent forms of activities within an organisation. These activities then allow the externalising and sharing of tacit knowledge that can provide synergistic inputs for managing outsourcing activities. Therefore, the I-A-R-R continuum is the fourth element of this paper conceptual framework.

However, for this tacit knowledge must be initially documented. This can be achieved by the value of self-documentation, which is also developed by meta-abilities (Butcher et al., 1997; Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). Due to the development of the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussion, rational discourse and meta-abilities, the willingness to question implicit assumptions, explore new possibilities and

directing energies toward higher standards enables a staff member to be well prepared and to use good quality documented progress reports or working papers. In the longer term this then ensures that there is a tangible means of verifying and validating tacit knowledge. Therefore, tacit knowledge documentation is the fifth element of this paper conceptual framework.

2.4 Developing individual-enabled outsourcing operational system

As explained earlier tacit knowledge must be documented. This knowledge is then transformed into explicit knowledge (e.g. through business reports, written descriptions or instructions). The entire self-documentation is then given to the outsourcing managers or officers. At this stage, the outsourcing managers/officers study the documented inputs provided by staff members and file them. These inputs become information that assist outsourcing managers/officers in communicating with outsourcee. This is the sixth element of this paper conceptual framework.

2.5 The conceptual framework

To understand the relationship between the earlier mentioned six elements a diagrammatic representation has been developed, which is illustrated below (Figure 1). As shown in the diagram, individual development is initially fostered by the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formality and informality, and rational discourse. In this case, the first element of the framework is represented by Stage A in the diagram. As the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions and rational discourse enable the use of knowledge and skills in an effective manner (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007), they are pertinent for the development of meta-abilities (Stage B). Stage B of the diagram represents the second element of the framework (as noted above). Four main meta-abilities were identified in the organisational development area: (1) cognitive skills; (2) self-knowledge; (3) emotional resilience and (4) personal drive (Butcher et al., 1997).

Additionally, it can be learnt that the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions, rational discourse and meta-abilities can assist in building a confident and responsible individual (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). This can be learnt from these three competencies: (1) influencing skills (Stage C); (2) sharing attitudes (Stage D); and (3) inquisitive tendencies (Stage E). These three stages represent the third element of the aforementioned theoretical framework. When undertaking influencing, sharing and inquiring activities, an individual implicitly expresses tacit knowledge. This expression is either in physical form (actions and reactions) or verbal form (ideas and reflection) (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007) (Stage F). This Ideas-Actions-Reactions-Reflections continuum provides externalised tacit knowledge for OP development (Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). Stage F of the diagram represents the fourth element of the framework (as noted above).

However, the externalised ideas, actions, reactions and reflections must initially be documented. This process is undertaken at Stage G and it represents the fifth element of the above theoretical framework. At this stage, the externalised tacit knowledge is documented and transformed into explicit knowledge (e.g., through business reports, written descriptions or instructions). Knowledge documentation can be achieved by the value of self-documentation, which is also developed by meta-abilities (Butcher et al., 1997; Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). This is due to the development of meta-abilities, the willingness to question implicit assumptions, explore new possibilities and direct energies toward higher standards enables the staff members to be well prepared, using good documented progress reports or working papers. All these self-documented facts in turn provide inputs for OP continuous improvement.

As noted above, the task of monitoring OP is the responsibility of outsourcing managers or officers. At this stage, the outsourcing managers/officers study the documented inputs provided by staff members and file them (Stage H). These inputs become information that assists staff members in fulfilling their responsibility. In the diagram, this process is represented by Stage I. Stages H and I represent the sixth element of the aforementioned theoretical framework.

Stage J details the tangible information in the system that can be disseminated within an organisation by using IT. By obtaining new information, a staff member is able to identify an operational progress, to access to new operational approaches, and ultimately internalise them. At this stage, staff members can determine outsourcing needs utilizing better knowledge and consequently monitoring OP effectively – the learning process. Through this learning process, an individual's understanding of the organisation's outsourcing activities (tacit knowledge) is enriched. This new understanding in turn becomes a platform for continuous OP re-examination and modification processes.

In this section the framework for outsourcing represents a framework for developing individual-enabled OP and will be used to guide the research process. The framework illustrates the elements that should be considered in order to create an environment conducive for monitoring outsourcing operations and activities within the organisation. By developing and explaining this framework this paper is trying to answer the following question: "How do we include individuals in the outsourcing development process? Why use meta-abilities in order to include individuals in the outsourcing development process? What is also learnt from this paper is that the cooperation between individuals, the outsourcing managers/officers and the organisation is also an important attribute to include in the process of developing individual-enabled OP.

3. Outsourcing Adoption Theories

From the above discussion it can be learnt that the framework supports the diffusion theory and theory of planned behavior in relation to IS adoption. Based on the diffusion theory proposed by Rogers (1983), this research argues that the iterative process of externalization and internalization between outsourcers and outsourcees can be termed as the diffusion of outsourcing processes. Rogers (2003) states that diffusion is "*the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system*" (p.5, Rogers, 2003). Therefore, we argue that diffusion occurs in our social system (the outsourcers and outsourcees) in the form of outsourcing processes requiring outsourcees to externalize and share their current system, disseminate it using technological means and outsourcers requiring internalizing of the current system knowledge in their minds (Rogers, 1983). Subsequently, the above process can ultimately diffuse knowledge and skills within the OP.

According to the theory of planned behavior, human actions such as, an outsourcee's decision to appoint an outsourcer, is guided by following three types of beliefs: first, behavioral beliefs that create a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the behavior; second, normative beliefs that produce perceived social pressure or subjective norms; and third, control beliefs that generate perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). These three types of constructs (i.e. attitude towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perception of behavioral control) are strongly related to the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formality and informality, rational discourse, and meta-abilities. This process leads to the formation of a behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991), which in turn is represented by the elements of influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies. Therefore, the theory of planned behaviour is considered to be the basic guiding theory for this research.

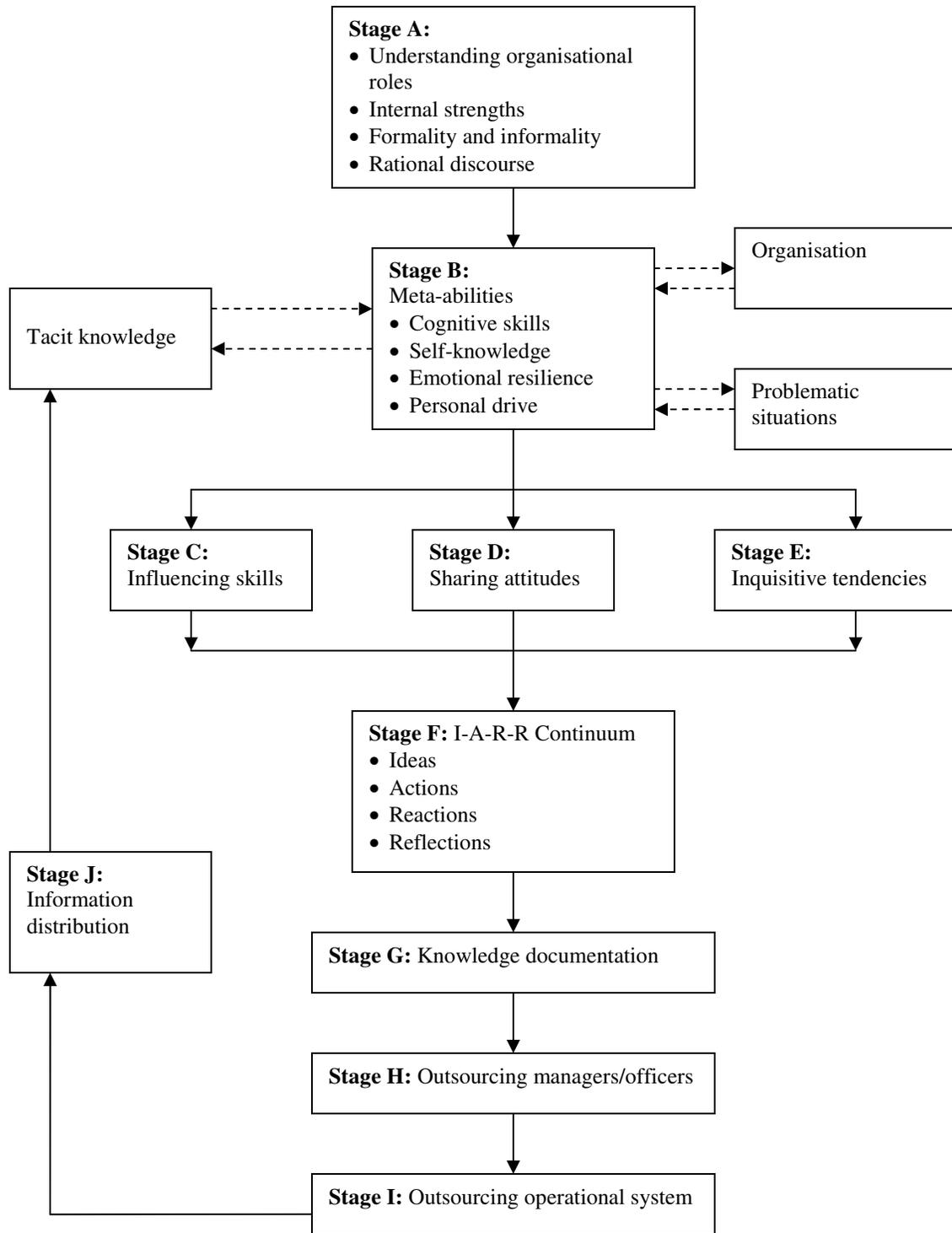


Figure 1 Framework for the individual-enabled outsourcing project

4. Implications for the Outsourcing Operational System

By signing outsourcing agreements, firms expect to reduce their overall IT costs, focus on their core competencies, and gain superior technical resources (Lacity and Willcocks, 1998).

Knowledge has been considered as one of the basic inputs for achieving this goal (Lee, 2001; McFarlan and Nolan, 1995; Selamat and Choudrie, 2007). What are the implications of the above framework in the development of individual-enabled outsourcing operational system? This will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

First and foremost, individual-enabled OP should concentrate more on the creation of externalisation and sharing practice. Tacit knowledge resides in an individual's mind and it is obtained through continuous individual learning and practical processes. Even the explicit knowledge such as instruction books, report and discussion documents can be argued to be the outcomes of tacit knowledge. Individual tacit knowledge can be in the form of skills, values, preferences and criteria. An individual will apply his or her tacit knowledge when undertaking a task. This process will slowly establish "best practices" in handling that task. To evade "reinventing the wheel" phenomena in doing that task, the need to create the right organisational culture and infrastructure in which knowledge can be shared and disseminated is important. Technology can certainly contribute in obtaining these environments by providing methods for the processing, delivery and sharing of valuable knowledge that is externalised by individuals. Therefore the focus of individual-enabled OP might be to concentrate on providing appropriate skills to enable organisational members to make explicit their tacit knowledge. If this view is accepted then individual-enabled OP might have a more legitimate focus within human resources departments rather than IT departments.

Second, the externalisation practice is established through the individual influencing, sharing and inquiring commitment and capabilities and is therefore founded on the growth of individual meta-abilities. Therefore a meta-abilities development programme can be used as a development strategy for individual-enabled OP in organisations. According to Butcher et al. (1997), initially the development of meta-abilities results in improved personal influencing skills, such as communication, assertiveness, dealing with conflict, persuading and developing others. Then, it contributes in important ways to individuals being more astute and insightful, able to make better judgements and to see more alternative actions. These internal qualities enable individuals to make explicit their tacit knowledge effectively and efficiently. This is evident from the idea, action, reaction and reflection produced when facing problems. In this paper, this is termed as the "I-A-R-R continuum". The I-A-R-R continuum can be used as a basis of providing relevant and reliable information for continuous OP re-examination and modification processes.

Third, the framework implies the importance of outsourcing managers/officers to attend the formal or informal meeting with organisational members in the organisation. The purpose of this meeting is to enable outsourcing managers/officers to acquire inputs from the organisational members and to improve outsourcing operations accordingly. This situation illustrates that in order to maintain an effective and efficient outsourcing operations, outsourcing managers/officers must go beyond their office. It is argued that in managing OP, it is not practical for outsourcing managers/officers to just simply predict the answer for the following questions in their office: "What should happen if this is the case?" or "What will happen if...?" Instead they have to meet and interact with the users, build good relationships with them and obtain their feedback on OP performance. This cohesive style will develop synergistic inputs for continuous improvement of OP.

Fourth, issues of accountability are pertinent for outsourcing since all the concerned parties need to be aware of the important and problematic issues and solutions to them. After the outsourcing company has left and the organisation is left to handle the situation on its own, the tacit knowledge held by the outsourcers is left in the form of manuals and audit trails. As argued above instruction manuals are the outcome of tacit knowledge. Therefore, when problems arise and

solutions on overcoming the barriers is available, an organisation can handle the situations in an easier, effective and better manner than without any information. The framework stage G regarding knowledge documentation allows for such a scenario to be dealt with.

Last but not least, the framework implies the importance of understanding of how to make an individual more accountable for the improvement of outsourcing operations and activities. Previous literature on knowledge management has highlighted the extensive role of individuals (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Malhotra, 2004). However most of the literature discusses the role of human beings in a mechanistic and structural form without explaining how an individual can make explicit his or her knowledge. This paper attempts to shed the light on this matter by studying the role of meta-abilities in the externalisation and sharing of tacit knowledge within the organisation. In this case, meta-abilities develop an individual's commitment and capabilities to externalise and share his or her knowledge in the form of I-A-R-R continuum.

4. Conclusion

There are many people elements that prevent individuals from externalising, expressing and sharing their tacit knowledge such as, lack of confidence, anxiety, unwillingness, confusion, and being carried away by strong feelings. This problem is critical in the process of building individual-enabled outsourcing operational systems as the involvement and the participation from the staff members are of paramount importance. This paper attempts to shed light on this matter by focusing on the elements that can encourage individuals to participate in the process of building individual-enabled outsourcing operational systems. To undertake this, two research questions are proposed that are as follows: *“How do we include individuals in the individual-enabled outsourcing operational system? Why use meta-abilities in order to include individuals in the individual-enabled outsourcing operational system?”* In other words, this paper has attempted to recognise and capitalise on the critical role that individual development plays in OP.

To achieve the aim of studying the elements that can encourage staff members to contribute inputs for OP development, this paper developed a conceptual framework based on the concepts of meta-abilities and tacit knowledge externalisation and sharing. Meta-abilities, in turn, are developed by using the elements of understanding organisational roles, internal strengths, formal and informal discussions and rational discourse. It is also illustrated in the framework that the development of meta-abilities results in the individuals influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies. Influencing skills, sharing attitudes and inquisitive tendencies in turn enable individuals to externalise their tacit knowledge in the form of creative idea, actions, reactions and reflection. Outsourcing managers/officers will document the externalised tacit knowledge and transform them into explicit knowledge such as, a business report, written descriptions and instructions. These self-documented facts in turn provide inputs for OP continuous improvement.

The whole process in the framework will ensure that the outsourcing operational system is subjected to continual re-examination and modification given the changing reality. Continuously challenging the current “company way,” such a system is expected to prevent the core capabilities of yesterday from becoming core rigidities of tomorrow. Therefore the main focus of individual-enabled OP should be towards an individual's meta-abilities development that extends creativity and interpretivity. There should also be an impetus towards creating the right organisational culture and infrastructure that promotes tacit knowledge sharing and externalisation within and between employees.

This research is pertinent to understand the individualistic elements associated with outsourcing. Therefore, future directions include utilising an in-depth case study to examine the suitability of the aforementioned framework. The reasoning for this is that a deeper and meaningful appreciation of the characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of this framework can be obtained by examining theory in a practical situation. Further future research is the concept of meta-abilities being studied in other IS research areas such as IS effectiveness and managing the human aspects of systems development and implementation. Further areas where this can be used are human-computer interaction, issues pertaining to group coordination and communication and managing the impact of information technologies on organisations planning and control strategies, would also benefit from an understanding of meta-abilities. This is because the growth of individual meta-abilities enables understanding on how to respond intelligently to unknown situations and go beyond established knowledge to create unique interpretations and outcomes.

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