Information Culture Toolkit

Introduction

Analysing the information culture of a workplace involves finding out how people work with the information they need to carry out their work (collecting data), interpreting that data to map it to the information culture framework (data analysis) and then bringing everything together to communicate an overall picture of the culture, or cultures, characterising the organisation (developing an information profile).

1. Collecting Data

The best way to build a picture of an organisation's information culture is by talking to people, either by having one on one conversations or by having group discussions. Which you choose will vary according to the organisation, and the relationship between staff. Group discussions can be very productive and mean that you can talk to several people at once, but if staff are likely to be reluctant to disagree with senior colleagues then having meetings with individuals will be more productive. There is no need to be exhaustive. You may limit your analysis to some departments or units within your organisation, and your conversations may just involve a few people playing different roles within those areas. Diversity is more crucial than comprehensiveness.

The purpose of these conversations isn't to check up on whether or not 'best practice' is being followed, but to find out how people actually go about using and managing information in their daily work, and what issues and challenges they meet.

Some practical tips:

- Do as much background research that you can to familiarize yourself with the organisation/department/unit's development, structure, mission and functions.
- Find a key person in each section to assist you in scheduling meetings, and provide them with enough information about your objectives as possible to help prepare people to answer your questions.
- A good way to begin is by giving a presentation to as many of the staff as practical to explain the information culture concept and the purpose of the interviews.
- Through your presentation or during your conversations with staff, provide reassurance that this isn't an inspection or an audit.

- Try to talk to at least one person from each functional area. Ask each individual at the conclusion of the interview whether they can suggest anyone else you should talk to.
- Try to make sure you don't just speak to people from the same level of the organisation.
- If the organisation is distributed, e.g. has a head office and regional branches, try to talk to a sample of people in different locations. Views from head office and branches can be polar opposites, and particularly if ICT doesn't support collaborative working across the whole organization, branch offices may establish the most comprehensive 'shadow' systems and workarounds.
- The key skill in this type of interviewing is listening. Encourage the interviewee to be expansive in their responses, and be alert for relevant areas to ask for further information about.

Suggested interview questions are included here. The questions are developed to encourage people to talk about the kind of information they work with (the 'what'), the ways in which they work with information (the 'how'), and so can be used as starting points - where appropriate, ask why they do things that way. Understanding the 'why' holds the keys to information culture.

2. Data Analysis

When you have completed your interviews or group discussions you will have collected a lot of information about the organisation and the way that people work. Making sense of that information may seem to be an impossible task, but the key is to focus on just three features: workarounds, genres, and infrastructure.

Use this template to help guide your analysis. There will be inevitable overlap between the three broad categories of workarounds, genres and infrastructure. Don't stress about trying to make something fit in one category only, or agonise about where it fits best. The important thing is to note down information in one or the other of these categories – there's no need to repeat unless thinking of it from a different perspective highlights different dimensions of information culture.

The next step is to map your analysis to the three level information culture framework:

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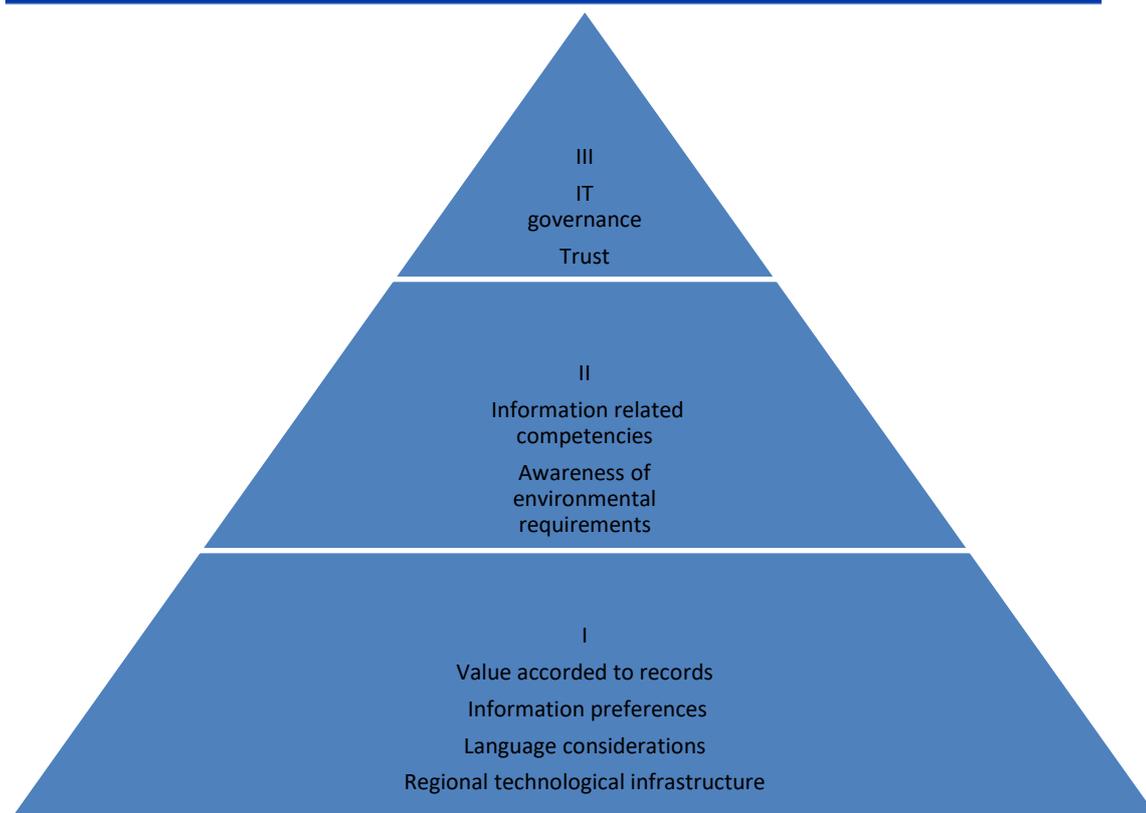
This is a critical step as it will help you differentiate between the features that you can target for action, and those that you should recognise but not necessarily be able to change. The features at the base of the pyramid are those that are fundamental influences on the ways in which things are done. Such deep influences are the hardest to change. Level 2, the middle of the pyramid, is concerned with people's information and digital literacy, the skills and expertise that they have in relation to working with information and using technology, as well as their knowledge of workplace policies and procedures (for instance, requirements to safeguard personal information about individuals). You may plan interventions (e.g., training) to improve factors at this level. Level 3, the tip of the pyramid, represents the aspects of corporate culture that are relevant to information management and most susceptible to change. This includes the extent to which people trust recordkeeping systems and thus their inclination to use them, as well as IT governance decisions which impact on recordkeeping systems such as limitations on email inbox size, firewall configurations, etc.

This template provides an example from a fictitious archival authority showing how genres, infrastructure and workarounds can be mapped to the framework. For more detail about the framework, see Oliver, Gillian, and Fiorella Foscarini. *Records management and information culture: Tackling the people problem*. London: Facet Publishing, 2014.

3. Information Profile

The final step is to compile a concise overview of your findings. This template can be used to help you present the information clearly and succinctly. One of the key challenges is to make sure that your analysis will guide or influence future actions or strategies, so it is important to try to communicate your findings in a positive rather than negative way. This is where you should be guided by the answers people gave to the last two questions on the interview guide. If their responses indicated that management was likely to react badly to critical observations then the utmost care and diplomacy should be used in crafting the information profile.

Here's a sample information profile developed for the fictitious archival authority.   Note the use of the wordcloud; this is a simple device that can be used to encourage reflection and discussion of information culture.

Do you have any suggestions that might help us improve the toolkit? Please let us know at gillian.oliver@monash.edu and fiorella.foscarini@utoronto.ca