

Interpersonal Help Seeking in Software Industry

A cross-cultural study

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Abstract

Organizations encourage interpersonal helping but employees are often reluctant to ask for help. There is a need to understand the psychology behind help seeking decision to encourage interpersonal helping in organizations. This paper presents a part of a larger study on help seeking at workplace, and describes the cross-cultural differences in considerations during decision to seek help. Propositions are developed based on exploratory interviews with 55 software employees working in India and United States of America. Differences in considerations in help seeking emerge not just from cultural perceptions, but also from different work arrangements in the two countries.

Introduction

Interpersonal helping contributes to knowledge sharing, team building, organizational learning, and enhancing organizational performance. Research has emphasized the importance of creating conditions at work where people are willing to seek help in order to solve work-related problems (e.g., Shapiro, 1984). Helping may be either proactive or upon a request from a help seeker.

Anderson and Williams (1996) argued that higher the perceived costs of seeking help, lesser the help seeking. Costs to help seeker come in the form of threat to self-esteem, threat to public esteem, indebtedness concerns (Shapiro, 1984), threat to independence (Brehm, 1966), inequity concerns (Greenberg, 1980), and lesser credit for task success (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). Social exchange theory (Homans, 1961; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), partly explains the view that man is a rational economic being who strives to minimize the costs and maximize the outcomes in any social situation.

It has been extensively observed and documented that most helping interactions at workplace are initiated by help seekers (Burke, Weir, & Duncan, 1976; Kaplan & Cowen, 1981), and people in need of help are reluctant in asking for it (DePaulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1984). Amato and Saunders (1985) acknowledged a surge in studies of helping process since the 1970s, aimed at identifying factors that affect the willingness to seek and accept help (e.g., Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971; Stokes & Bickman, 1974). However, much of this research was laboratory based and studied the behavior in simulated situations (e.g., Greenberg & Shapiro, 1971; Nadler & Halabi, 2006). Most studies have focused on helping in social situations. Only few recent studies have focused on help seeking in the organizational context (e.g. Lee, 1997; Nadler, Ellis, & Bar, 2003). Our understanding of the process, factors, and dilemmas behind the decision to seek help is limited. Knowing the considerations in the mind of the

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help seeker preceding the actual act of help seeking would help in deeper understanding of the dynamics of help seeking in organizations, and the factors affecting such dynamics.

There is also a need to explore relationship between occupational roles and help seeking (Lee, 2002). The context of software work makes it a ripe area for study on help seeking. Software occupation is knowledge based, needing each individual to be an expert; also, for the work to be completed in entirety, teamwork and co-operation is necessary (Perlow & Weeks, 2002). Almost by definition, the business model requires managing diverse parties to work together, sometimes across countries; cross-cultural teams are commonplace in most software organizations with varying levels of contact. All of these factors make the context of software industry rich and complex to explore.

Research has explored cultural influence in the decision to help (e.g., Miller & Luthar, 1989; Miller & Bersoff, 1998). Simple explanations for cultural differences in helping behavior are unlikely (Pepitone, 1999). For help seeking too, research identifies major determinants as help seeker's race, ethnicity, and geographic origin (Levine, 2003; Nickerson, Helms, & Terrell, 1994). However, very little research is available in mixed-cultural situations on the choice of helper, appropriateness of helper for different kind of needs, framing the help-seeking request depending on the nationality of the potential helper, and influence of nationality of the help seeker and helper in influencing help seeking behavior. The existing research does not provide us any pointers to such and more complex questions. Thus, this study explores the cross-cultural influence in the complex psychological decision to seek help.

This cross-cultural study was conducted in India and United States of America. USA is the leader in the world in software business, and India serves as one of the leading countries to host outsourced projects (Xia & Gupta, 2009). This symbiotic existence leads to large number of Indian software professionals working for American businesses and services, several of them working in India and a smaller percentage operating in USA.

According to Perlow and Weeks (2002), India and USA provide a useful comparison since their cultural orientations are different. Hofstede's Index Values (2010) indicate that India and USA are similar on uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity, and dissimilar on individualism-collectivism, power distance, and long-term orientation. Cultural differences have been indicated by earlier studies in the context of helping. Miller, Bersoff, and Harwood (1990) suggested that while Indians value interdependence and mutual aid, Americans value individual liberty. Markus and Kitayama's (1991) study argued that Indians construe themselves in an interdependent mode and Americans construe themselves in self-dependent mode. Perlow and Weeks (2002) established that Indians see help as a moral responsibility and provide help on communal relationships, while Americans see help as a personal choice and provide help on exchange relationships. They further argued that while Indians frame help as an opportunity, Americans frame it as an unwanted interruption at work. Hence, we predict a difference in help seeking between software employees in India and USA.

Whereas in the past merely possessing technical competence was sufficient for ensuring competitiveness in the market, with increasing globalization, an understanding and appreciation of different cultural outlooks is essential for business success (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002). In today's globalized and well-connected world, it seems important to re-open the help-seeking chapter and explore how employees perceive help seeking in a multicultural context. This paper is a part of a larger study on exploring help seeking as perceived by software employees. Here we present the cultural differences in taking the decision to seek help at workplace.

The area of help seeking in knowledge industry in a cross-cultural context is virtually unexplored, and previous research on helping in social contexts was not enough for us to make conjectures about the decision making process of the help-seeker to ask for help. Hence,

we used qualitative methodology for exploration. Qualitative research is a holistic way of understanding a phenomenon by examining various interactions and multiple meanings (Karasz & Singelis, 2009). To look for these meanings, we followed grounded theory technique since it seeks to unfold relevant conditions of a little known phenomenon and how actors respond to them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Data and Methodology

Sample

A total of 55 respondents comprising of 12 females and 43 males from the software industry were interviewed. The work experience range was 3 to 17 years. The respondents were approached through the social networks of researchers, none of the respondents being immediate contacts. The respondents were divided into three sets – Indians working in India (Set 1) (19), Indians working in USA (Set 2) (19), and Americans working in USA (Set 3) (17). Set 2 comprised of Indians working at client site, and those working at employer workplace. At least some part of their role profile of respondents included software development. The sample size was determined by saturation in new concepts and events in the interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Data Collection and Analysis

An email describing the purpose of study, requesting participation, and seeking permission to voice record the interview was sent to potential respondents. The first author has worked in the software industry for 2 years; this contributed to awareness of the software context. Unstructured interviews of an average duration of 60 minutes each were conducted in person, over videoconference, and over phone as per the preference of the respondents. It was ensured that the respondents were not at their workplace when these interviews were conducted. In these interviews, the respondents were encouraged to share their help seeking experiences at work in different situations in the form of episodes and anecdotes. Parallel memo writing was done during and after interviews. In accordance with the grounded theory approach, the interviews were transcribed, and open, axial, and selective coding were carried out to extract salient themes from the data.

Findings

National cultures of origin and workplace countries interacted to form perceptions which shaped help seeking decision at workplace. Within Indians living in the USA (referred hitherto as set 2), some patterns were similar to Indians living in India (referred as set 1), and some to Americans living in America (set 3) indicating individual differences in levels of influence of a second culture. The work context also made a difference. For example, Indians in USA working at client locations had to be more cautious while seeking help from the client given the nature of the relationship. While looking for cultural differences, the data indicated differences that emerged not just from culturally influenced intimacy perceptions, but also from the different work arrangements in the two countries. The following section elaborates on the differences and their influence on the decision to seek help at workplace.

Intimacy Perceptions

Relationship intimacy

Set 1- friends: During the interviews, respondents in set 1 referred to their co-workers as friends, and also mentioned having ‘good friends’ and ‘close friends’ at workplace. Respondents had a close friend circle with the group in which they were recruited and trained.

Trust and understanding were built by spending time together in the organization, which led to an assurance that these friends would empathize with them and understand them when they sought help. One respondent mentioned the following:

“Close friends are the ones whom I joined the organization with, our growth in the company technically and professionally has been very parallel, so we sort of understand each other’s competency and capacities, if I describe them my problem they know where I am coming from”.

Help seeking from friends was based on the understanding of mutual help, like a respondent reported:

“I am very much sure that I have lot many friends whom I will request just little bit, even if he is having some work in his project, he will atleast give me some help. This depends on your part also. They also know that I will also help them.”

Set 2- friendly colleagues: Set 2 gave mixed responses. Indians employed at American workplaces reported having ‘friendly colleagues’ at workplace with whom they had lunch and coffee. They expressed greater willingness to seek help from these people first since daily interactions had built familiarity. This reduced concerns of appearing incompetent. These respondents considered people who would spend time with them on weekends as friends, which did not happen with office colleagues. A respondent’s comment indicates construal of intimacy levels:

“You keep a professional relationship with everybody and then you have slightly closer relationship. Because we are more friendly like hanging out at lunch time and all so there are people who you get to know a little more on a personal level. You can tell them a lot more when it comes to asking for help so you can say can you just come here and help me.”

Respondents working at client site reported having friends at workplace, but only those from their employing organization who were also onsite with them at the same client workplace. They expressed greater willingness to seek help from these friends and high reluctance to seek help from the client. Onsite coordinators shared concerns about managing a competent impression not just for themselves, but also for their organizations. With fewer people from their own organizations at workplace, they tended to form a cohesive group, and an understanding of mutual helping was developed. A respondent working onsite mentioned:

“Most of us came from offshore so we know each other from long time from off shore. They joined as a fresher after me, when we were at offshore we used to hang out.”

Similar to responses from set 1, some onsite respondents also mentioned mutual help seeking among friends as a motivation to seek help from friends in the following way:

“Some are my friends also. I talk to first my colleagues and friends because I am close to them, I talk to them everyday. Its a mutual kind of thing. I have other colleagues also but I don’t feel that comfort level in asking them.”

Set 3- work friends: Set 3 also expressed an inclination towards closer relationships first to seek help. However, they termed these as ‘work friends’. They did not go out with these work friends outside office, but spent lunch and coffee breaks with them. They believed that frequent interactions created a stable impression for them and hence, inhibitions to seeking help were reduced. Lesser chances of help refusal were perceived which encouraged seeking help from work friends. For example:

“I think I will go to the work friend first because I have that communication channel already open and it wouldn’t be any different just go and ask them. But if it was someone I wasn’t familiar with, not knowing are they under a deadline or they may be annoyed by me asking. Just how are they going to react, there is a lot of unknown stuff. So I will be

more comfortable with my friend”.

In-group, out-group concerns seem to be very high in help-seeking decision among people of both nationalities. Hence, we propose:

Proposition 1: Perceived intimacy in relationship with the helper encourages help seeking.

Proposition 1a: For Indians working in India, perceived intimacy in relationship with the helper encourages help seeking based on reciprocation.

Proposition 1b: For Americans working in USA, perceived intimacy in relationship with the helper encourages help seeking based on ease of communication, and lesser impression management concerns.

Problem intimacy

Set 1- very personal problems: Set 1 narrated help seeking episodes on personal and emotionally stressful problems. Help seeking was reported on issues like break-ups, organizing events in the family, or a difficult colleague at workplace. For example:

“If you talk to any guy in India he will tell you I have a girlfriend, my father is against our marriage and all, even if he is not your friend you will become buddies in few months when a person joins in”

Help for career growth, which demanded confidentiality, was also sought at work. Preferred helpers for such problems were friends at workplace. Friends implied greater trust and more reliable help. A respondent mentioned:

“If it’s a technical query then I won’t care but if it’s a personal matter inside office like some issues with somebody at work, or something non-technical, non- work related issues at work, I definitely go to my friends.”

Set 2- mixed responses: Help was sought on personal issues from closer colleagues and peers at work. For more workplace specific help like interpersonal issues or career growth, most respondents turned to their managers as they were well informed and had greater authority. For instance:

“If its impacting anything that I do or my work I approach my manager, but if its just some random stuff or some comment about a person then you do it in a much smaller circle and people who are closer to you. Peers who are more friendly”

Degree of intimacy of personal issues at which help was sought, varied among individuals. While some reported seeking help on suggestions for vacation, some reported emotional issues. For example, a respondent sought emotional support on losing a parent:

“When mom passed away I had to go back to India everyone was really supportive. When I was back I was at a complete loss and I didn’t know what to do. A couple of them had recently gone through that so I talked to them what did you guys do. It is not easy to re-live the moment again and again when someone asks what did you do to cope with the loss and these people really spent time outside of work telling me this is what I did and now I am at this stage.”

Set 2 showed similarities to both sets 1 and 3. Some respondents also sought emotional help at work like those in set 1. Help seeking from managers due to their position and authority was similar to responses in set 3.

“Manager because other person doesn’t have the authority to resolve that grievance. You need to talk to someone who either has the authority or can find somebody. I knew the right authority, that would be the manager”

Set 3- impersonal issues: Most people sought work related help. Most non-work help was reported on interpersonal issues with some co-worker. Work friends were preferred for

seeking advice, confirmation, and venting out since perceived level of trust was greater. In certain cases, managers were also approached since they had the required experience and authority. A respondent described help seeking on interpersonal issues in the following manner:

“Usually you go to people you are comfortable with and you trust. You say hey this person is treating me this way, what do you think. Have you had the same experience? Work friends. Also managers. You tell your manager, you get feedback from your manager too”

Hence, we propose:

Proposition 2: Help seeking at workplace is for both work and non-work issues.

Proposition 2a: Indians working in India seek non-work help at workplace on personal issues.

Proposition 2b: Americans working in USA seek non-work help at workplace on impersonal issues.

Work Arrangements

Time considerations

Set 1- extendable work timings: It was common for employees at Indian workplaces to work beyond the prescribed work timings. Working on weekends, and staying back late at work, were frequent practices. Focus was on getting the deliverable ready within time. Potential helpers being busy, or time, were not reported as major considerations while seeking help. Asking people to stay back late or to come on weekends for help was not an aberration. Hence, concern of taking helper's time was less. A respondent reported:

“In India if you have a good relation you can ask someone to stay back for you for 1-2 hour or he may stay for some more time”.

Sets 2 and 3- fixed work timings: No help seeking was reported after office hours. Fixed working hours created the perception of people being busy with their own work. Help seeking was termed as a ‘botheration’ and ‘disturbance’. Workload of a potential helper emerged as a big concern while seeking help. For example:

“Here people work for so confined times, 9 hours, each and every hour is so productive. People are not expected to work after 5.”

“The person might be very busy. You might be unnecessarily wasting his time.”

“That is one thing I think before going to somebody else if they are in the middle of something, shall I disturb the person or not”.

Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 3: Willingness to seek help is less from a potential helper who is perceived to be busy with other commitments.

Proposition 3a: For Indians working in India, helper's time is not a major consideration while seeking help.

Proposition 3b: For Indians and Americans working in USA, helper's time is a major consideration while seeking help.

Career aspirations

Set 1- on management path: though all respondents had received technical education, and were involved in technical work, their final aspiration was to move higher up the management ladder. It was very important for the respondents to take up managerial responsibilities and to learn management skills. There were societal expectations to move to a

lead or manager profile after seven to eight years in the career. A respondent expressed this in the following manner:

“In India if I tell someone that I am a developer after 18 years of experience, socially it is considered unacceptable. We associate ourselves to big and fancy designations and huge salaries. If you look at the way Indian IT industry positions are shaped, you will never find that a developer makes more than his manager no matter how much experience you have. So in order to make more, any individual needs to choose a more profitable line. Which ends up being management.”

It was considered extremely important to prove oneself technically before expecting consideration from the manager for a promotion to a management role. This meant being in the good books of the manager, and building and maintaining impression of competence, and independence. Seeking help from the manager entailed more deliberation than from anyone else. For example:

“If I go to that particular person who is manager or something maybe I won't be able to discuss with him freely. I may think that he might not be free at this point and I may also feel that he might take it that way, that this person is coming every now and then to me.”

“To choose the right words and not to have too much of negativity in my question and I have to take caution not to sound very negative, like instead of saying how many methods didn't work I would say how many methods worked.”

Sets 2 and 3- on competence path: Respondents working at American workplaces reported that an individual could choose to remain in the technical field and move up the hierarchy as a technical expert in the organization. Greater power and salary was not implied by position in the hierarchy, rather by competence and personal interest in the field. There were no social expectations attached to managerial roles. For instance, a respondent reported:

“To be a manager you don't need to be technically sound. The skill you need is project management.”

Help sought from managers was generally in the form of advice on career growth and on interpersonal issues. Maintaining an impression of technical competence in front of the manager was not a big concern for sets 2 and 3. However, Indians in set 2 who were on onsite assignments, gave responses similar to those in set 1. This implied lesser help seeking from or in the presence of the client managers.

“It's not my own company and it's showing your weakness to someone outsider [client manager]. We are working from long time and they are friends but why to show your weakness to outsider.”

Based on the above arguments we propose the following:

Proposition 4: Help seeking creates fear of negative evaluation by managers.

Proposition 4a: For Indians employed at Indian workplaces, negative evaluation by managers while help seeking is a major concern.

Proposition 4b: For Indians and Americans employed at American workplaces, negative evaluation by managers while help seeking is not a major concern.

Discussion

Cultural considerations become important in software industry due to geographic dispersion. However, it emerged from the interviews, that the differences in work arrangements in different countries also have implications on the employee's decision to seek help at workplace.

Strong interpersonal relationships place the help seeker in helper's in-group, thereby

increasing legitimacy in reaching out for help (Hofmann, Lei, & Grant, 2009). Both India and USA prefer in-group first for seeking help. However, the reasons for this preference may be different. While Indians working in India may prefer intimate relationships due to reciprocation opportunities, Indians and Americans employed with workplaces in USA may prefer intimate relationships due to ease of communication, and low concern about creating a negative impression.

People seek help at workplace both on work and non-work issues. This is in agreement with Nadler's (1991) finding that other than technical problems, employees also seek help from co-workers on emotional and personal health issues. However, cultural differences govern the extent of intimacy of problems. While at Indian workplaces employees may seek non-work help on more intimate issues, at American workplaces, the non-work help seeking is on issues that are low on intimacy.

The perception of potential helper being busy causes unwillingness to seek help. Costs of help seeking may emerge from a perception of the helper being interrupted, inconvenienced, and being imposed upon (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). At American workplaces these costs become more salient in help seeking decision since the workplace timings are fixed. At Indian workplaces, since people work beyond the prescribed hours, the concern for the helper being bothered, interrupted, and disturbed by help seeking is not salient to the help seeking decision.

Help seeking poses a threat of negative impression in front of managers. There is a higher motivation for positive self-presentation in front of valued others (Nadler, Altman, & Fisher, 1979). Since managers are responsible for appraisals and evaluations, the subordinates value them. Help seeking in front of or from managers may imply lower evaluation. However, these concerns are more salient at Indian workplaces since growth on the managerial path is considered more desirable than that on the technical path; negative evaluation by manager can hamper growth prospects on managerial path. At American workplaces since a technical growth path is considered equally lucrative, growth on managerial path is not left as the only perceived option for progress. Hence, concern about negative evaluation by managers may not majorly affect the help seeking decision.

Conclusion

Mapping organizational and employee expectations will build workplaces with more cooperation and fewer inhibitions. With better understanding of help seeking considerations for employees, organizations can take steps in the direction of creating an atmosphere conducive to help seeking, where employees can derive maximum benefit out of interpersonal helping.

Our study identified some concerns of help seekers at workplace that are influenced by national culture. As predicted earlier, culturally determined perceptions did play a role in shaping the decision to seek help at workplace. However, difference in the work arrangements in the two countries also emerged as important influencer in the help seeking decision. Thus, differences in cultural perceptions, and work arrangements together will create differences in considerations in help seeking decision. The propositions developed may be tested for future research.

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