Global Best Practices and Local Understandings of Work: Evidence from Technology Use in an Indian Handicraft Cluster

Aruna Ranganathan  
Stanford University

Scholars have demonstrated that best practices around organizing work that emerge in one cultural context often fail to be effective in other cultural contexts (for a review, see Hinds, Liu and Lyon 2011, Cramton and Hinds 2014, Leonardi and Rodriguez-Lluesma 2013). In particular, two explanations have been highlighted to explain this pattern. First, differences in values, attitudes and beliefs, such as individualism and collectivism, across different cultures might prevent practices that work well in one context from translating into the “best” way of organizing work in another (Baba et al 2004, Chen et al 1998). Second, differences in institutions, such as career advancement systems, across different countries might also hamper the successful export of best practices from one cultural context to another (Walsham and Sahay 1999, Walsham 2002).

In this paper, I document two instances of Western best practices around technology usage in woodworking being transported to the same handicraft cluster in India, where one best practice resonated with the local artisans and was widely adopted and effective in increasing productivity, while the other practice was fiercely rejected by the artisans. The existing theories cannot explain this pattern since values and institutions differed similarly in both the cases, and yet the technology transfer was successful in one case and not the other.

Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork and over fifty semi-structured interviews conducted with artisans in an Indian wood and lacquerware handicraft cluster, this paper uncovers a third condition under which best practices might fail to be equally effective in different cultural contexts. I find that when Western best practices reinforce artisans’ relationship with their work, they are likely to be adopted while when these best practices interfere with artisans’ relationship with their work, they are likely to be resisted. More broadly, I argue that when the local understanding of the work being performed varies across cultural contexts, best practices uncovered in one context might not transfer well to another. In this way, the paper makes two important contributions to the literature on global best practices. First, the paper highlights a third factor, namely understandings of work that can pose as a barrier to the cross-border export of best practices and by doing so, the paper responds to the call to “embrace a messier [and less static] view of culture” in studying the diffusion of global best practices (Hinds, Liu and Lyon 2011). Second, the paper highlights that the existing literature can be applied to the study of best practices not just within global organizations, but also to the study of industry best practices and in this way, can offer important policy lessons to developing economies seeking to emulate best practices from industrialized nations.