11 Going Local: The Hybridization Process as Situated Learning

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You start out by making a photocopy of the Japanese way of producing and organizing. After that it’s a matter of adapting that original photocopy to local reality. It’s like I build a plant which is identical to one which already exists in some other part of the world, because that’s generally how I think a plant should be, after which I put in local managers and they see, they know what elements of the model it’s profitable to use locally and which elements have to be adapted or just dropped. (Italian Plant Manager)

INTRODUCTION

Although recent studies indicate that each geographic region builds its own, characteristic response to the globally competitive environment (Whitley, 1990, 1992; Bird, Curtis Putnam, Robertson and Ticknev (eds) 1993; BRIE, 1994; Kristensen, 1994; Clark, 1995), the term ‘globalization’ generally evokes the image of a world becoming more uniform and standardized through a technological, commercial and cultural synchronization emanating from Western capitalism (Bartlett and Ghosal, 1989; Ohmae, 1990; Morris, 1991; Edgington, 1994). Thus discussions of globalization often assume its evolutionary linearity, and ignore the impact that non-Western cultures have been making on the West (as well as their idiosyncratic ways of globalizing).

My own research is based on the conceptualization of economic globalization as one among many multidirectional processes of social ‘hybridization’ which is giving rise to novel recombinations of Asian, American and European organizational patterns and practices (Nederveen Pieterse, 1994). This emphasis on the larger social processes, of which transnational organizations are but one aspect, shifts interest away from the problematics of more or less successful transfer typical of static approaches.
to ‘Japanization’ (Oliver and Wilkinson, 1988; Kenney and Florida, 1993; Abo, 1994), and redirects it towards the hybridization process itself, also raising curiosity about what we can learn from the hybrids which are emerging worldwide by viewing them as instances of organizational innovation.

This study examines what happened when an eminently globalized Japanese company’s Italian transplant ‘went local’. (The parent company, which I shall call NICHIDEN, is a world-class producer of consumer electronics which manufactures audio components in its Italian facility.) Juxtaposing the understanding offered by an interpretive, narrative account and the type of knowledge offered by Abo’s mapping approach, it focuses upon the local reception of transferred practices, and highlights the progressive structuration of strategies and constraints which emerged as local and transnational actors engaged in negotiating their divergent interests and world-views.

The study itself led me to reconsider in terms of cross-cultural organizational learning something which I was initially tempted to dismiss as an ‘exemplary-case-of-successful localization-as-described-by-mainstream-literature’. When organizational hybridization (for example, reciprocal adjustment within the context of specific business constraints) is viewed as a learning process, the exemplary is problematized. What kind of learning is going on? And what is peculiar in NICHIDEN’s organizational culture and/or ‘architecture’ (Brown and Duguid, 1991) which elicits a type of learning that involves both local mutation and the maintenance of corporate identity?

In these pages I will argue that it is particularly illuminating to view the hybridization process in terms of the ‘situated learning’ which occurs within organizational ‘communities of practice’ as foreign members become skilled corporate ‘insiders’ (Suchman, 1987; Lave, 1988; Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Feldman, 1995); and that, as the Plant Director’s words at the beginning of this article suggest, an important factor in the success of NICHIDEN’S foreign hybrids may involve the company’s idiosyncratic way of relating abstract corporate visions and strategic plans to its members’ situated actions (Suchman, 1987).

The chapter will be divided as follows. In the first section, a brief discussion of the Japanese debate on internationalization will place Abo’s ‘dilemma model’ in context. In the second section, I trace the outlines of the NICHIDEN case and discuss the mixture of methodologies employed in this study. In the third section, executives, managers, workers, and union leaders tell – and retell – the story of NICHIDEN’s localization process from their various perspectives. In the fourth section, I map the Italian