

A Comparison of Organizational Cultures
in the Marketing Departments
of Oracle and Applied Materials

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From 2000 to 2009 I worked as an internet archivist and web producer for two large Bay Area technology firms, Oracle, located in Redwood Shores and Applied Materials, located in Santa Clara, California. Though my job description was nearly identical on paper, the experiences were very different due in large part to their organizational cultures and the companies' interactions with the tripartite environment. After outlining the histories of Oracle and Applied Materials, I will compare and contrast their organizational cultures. From conclusions drawn from their similarities and differences I will examine possible reasons behind their interactions to the tripartite environment.

Company Profiles

Oracle began as Software Development Laboratories in 1977, cofounded by Lawrence (Larry) J. Ellison, Robert (Bob) Miner and Ed Oats (Lazenby, Lindquist, & Bright, 2007). The company has since expanded and diversified beyond databases to include electronics (servers), remote hosting (cloud computing), consulting, remote education and on demand services (Corporate Information, 2011b).

Applied Materials is a decade older than Oracle, beginning in an industrial park in Mountain View, California in 1967 (Applied Materials, 2010). It started as a semiconductor company and has since then expanded to include photovoltaic cell construction, liquid crystal display technology and automation software (Corporate Information, 2011a).

Differences

Schein (1986) defines organizational culture as the "pattern of basic assumptions that the group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" and the longer the history of the company, the stronger that feeling of culture is (p. 30). Although Oracle and Applied Materials appear to be very similar companies, being both Bay Area technology corporations of similar age, they have very different organizational cultures that affect how they interact with the tripartite environment.

For my three years at Oracle, I was a salaried employee working with a close knit team of IT professionals for a broadband marketing wing of a much larger marketing organization that at its peak had approximately one thousand employees. As a small team, separated both by our physical location (in a different building) and our stated purpose (viral vs. mainstream marketing) we quickly developed our own organizational culture that was not always in sync with the larger marketing wing or the company as a whole. Nonetheless, I and my coworkers were acutely aware of the different organizational cultures at play, especially when our internal culture was at odds with directives from the marketing executives or from the CEO or Board of Directors.

As Applied Materials is ten years older than Oracle, I should have felt a stronger sense of organizational culture there than I did at Oracle. While I was aware of distinct cultural differences between the teams I had to coordinate with, corporate communications and web development, mainly, I always experienced these cultures as an outsider. I attribute this to the fact that I wasn't technically an Applied employee, even though I had a company badge. From the perspective of the average Applied Materials employee, I was a contractor and the web

producer in charge of running the employee portals, a job which included archiving previous issues and associated files (white papers, presentations, and so forth). I was however, actually a vendor, an employee of a small software development company, Beck Interactive, who had the contract for building and maintaining both Applied's internet site and their intranet portal. Therefore I was forever straddling two different corporate cultures, Applied's established technology sector culture and the start up / Mom-and-Pop culture of Beck Interactive. That disconnect was further expanded when I was later allowed to telecommute from my home.

The organizational culture disconnect I felt while working for Applied gave me the advantage of being able to mitigate the needs and personality differences off the disparate teams. As I didn't have any perceived loyalties to any of the Applied teams, nor a place in the corporate hierarchy I was able to speak out of turn and use my neutrality to serve as a mediator and guide during complex and stressful inter-team collaborations.

Another cause of the organizational culture disconnect I felt at Applied stems from my location. Oracle at the time insisted that all employees work on site, regardless of the nature of the work and even though they maintained a virtual network computing (VNC) line for remote work. Applied as part of its Green initiative, however, heavily encouraged their office staff (those not working in Clean Rooms or other labs) to work from home using their vast VNC.

My case with Applied was a unique one, though, I was always working remote as I was a vendor providing a cost-saving service to them. Although I had a photo ID issued by the company that could serve as a keycard, the contract did not include desk space on site. When I started the contract I was working remotely with two Santa Clara based teams, Corporate Relations and the Web Development. Later the portal management was transferred to their Austen office, thus causing even more of an organizational culture disconnect for both teams and

myself. As the job progressed I had to devote more of my time each day acting as a moderator between the vastly different organizational cultures of the Web Development team which had a rather informal, technology start-up approach to business and the Austin-based Corporate Relations which was more formal and traditional.

Similarities

Despite Oracle and Applied's cultural differences, my duties at both companies were nearly identical. For both positions I was working for an internal marketing team. As Oracle's "E-Business Network" later renamed "Broadband Marketing" was created the year I started my job it's placement was less well defined than Corporate Relation's role in Applied Material's marketing organization.

My primary job title would now be called web based corporate librarian or archivist. Neither company though defined the work in terms of librarianship nor did either require someone with an MLIS to do the work (though most local corporations now do). In the early 2000s, running an intranet, even archiving confidential materials was seen as a subset of web design. In both cases I was hired for my design skills even though I was mostly archiving materials and creating a virtual library for employees to find the marketing materials they needed for their campaigns or reports. These marketing portals started as ways to keep previously created materials in one easy to find, central location, and evolved into a method for employees to exchange knowledge (von Krogh, Nonaka, & Aben, 2001).

In the decade I worked on creating, maintaining and archiving these employee marketing portals, the corporate understanding of the value of a web based library grew. In my earliest days at Oracle, the web portal, being a thing seen only by employees wasn't seen as an exciting or important job. Oracle management and executives though began to see the strategic value of

being able to point all employees to one location to find the the current marketing and sales campaigns. As Cao, Wiengarten and Humphreys note, "...[the] better the strategic IT alignment, the higher the firm performance; the worse the strategic IT alignment, the lower the firm performance" (2011, p. 87).

What I hadn't appreciated during my employment was how much the position had evolved. In 2009 Applied Materials decided to take control of the archive I had built over the last six years and hire a corporate librarian to manage the portal. Now most local (Bay Area) corporations require someone with my skill set to also have an MLIS. To adapt to the changing nature of my field I have gone back to school.

Tripartite Environment

Adaptability to the changing environment brings me to the tripartite environment. Evans and Ward (2007) divide the influences on an organizational culture into three parts: internal, the parent organization, and the external environment. How Oracle and Applied responded to these tripartite influences further sets the two corporate cultures apart with Applied being an innovator and Oracle being an imitator.

Naranjo-Valencia, Jiménez-Jiménez, and Sans-Valle (2011) divide company culture into two types: innovators and imitators. The innovators have an organizational culture that fosters risk taking and invention for the benefit of putting the company at the forefront of its niche industry. Imitators come in behind the innovators to refine the products and services available to attract secondary adopters or to find niches that the innovators missed (Zhou, 2006; Shankar et al., 1999).

Oracle's late 1990s business plan was to sell their database suite to all the dot-com companies that were springing up in the Bay Area. When the venture capital dried up and most

of the dot-coms went out of business Oracle froze all pay raises and all bonuses, including those for innovation. We were supposed to focus on selling the current product (9i) and not under any circumstances try to push the company in market sectors it was not currently in as executives were not willing to take the risk and would not provide any financial backing for any project not previously approved.

Oracle's response then to the changing external environment created a somewhat hostile and very stressful environment both at the parent and individual levels. It also left the company with a flattening stock price, an overly expensive product line that large corporations already had and that small corporations didn't feel like they could afford given the economic conditions. Thus, the company fluctuated between second and third place on the list of database sellers.

Applied on the other hand, took the same economic down turn and challenged its employees to find other ways for company to function. Within about a year of my starting there someone at the company had realized the technology and expertise it has to make silicon chips could be modified to make solar panels and LCD screens. Instead of freezing innovation as Oracle had, Applied took big financial risks and branched out into new technologies. This innovation fostered a happier work environment and perhaps at the individual level, lowered the stress levels.

Conclusion

The same job description on paper can result in very different experiences depending on the organizational cultures and the way in which the companies react to tripartite environmental influences. Oracle and Applied Materials, while both being Bay Area technology companies, foster different working environments. Oracle in its overly cautious reaction to the failures of the dot-coms set itself up for a decade of being an imitator rather than the innovator it brands itself

as. Meanwhile, Applied Materials, the older and more established technology manufacturer, saw the change in the market as a chance to reinvent itself, moving from strictly making semiconductors and silicon chips to also making photovoltaic cells and LCD monitors.

Along with the corporate cultures affecting how the companies evolved, the understanding of and the value placed on intranet based corporate archives changed too. Starting as something that had to be done but wasn't seen as a vital piece of knowledge management became a highly skilled position, one that today requires an employee with an MLIS. Thus I have also learned to adapt and retrain because I would prefer to be an innovator than an imitator.

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