



Embedding Cultural Values within Nationalization Strategies: A case from the Kingdom of Bahrain

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Nationalization strategies within Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) need to consider culture as a factor to retain nationals in the process of retaining nationals in the private sector. The paper explores the literature in the area of culture indicating views that describe the cultural barriers in retaining human resources development within the (GCC) labour market. The development of “culturally sensitive strategies” is evident in the literature review. The researcher analysed the factors within the labour market of one GCC country, the Kingdom of Bahrain. The paper presents the findings in Bahrain which emphasize that cultural values can cause a change in the labour market. The paper findings indicate that having cultural barriers within Bahrain increases the pressure of achieving nationalization within the private sector, especially with a population of educated female nationals that have more cultural restrictions towards working in certain sectors. “Culturally sensitive strategies” are evident to be necessary as respondents in the private sector had high positive responses. However, current Bahrainization strategies to encourage nationals to join sectors that are outside the cultural context face the challenge of ‘sustainability’ and ‘retention of national resources’. **Research Methodology:** The research implements a qualitative methodology through interviews. Five to eight managerial level interviews were conducted in each of the seven private organizations, where questionnaires were distributed, totalling 38 interviewees. The interviews were conducted with managerial level employees; In addition, 28 interviews were conducted with government officials in managerial positions only. Hence, a total analysis of 66 interviews and data findings are discussed in the paper. **Findings:** Private sector employers resist Bahraini employment owing to culture. It is evident that culturally sensitive strategies need to be embedded within nationalization strategies.

Key words: *Nationalization, Bahrainization, Culture, national labour participation.*



Introduction

The World Bank (2004) describes GCC states as going through the situation of an unprecedented job creation challenge. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been affected by increasing international labor mobility over the past thirty years (Ahuja 1997; Ruppert 1998; Stalker 1994). Nationals continue to prefer to work in the public sector, considering it a birth right and part of their social status (Suliaman 2006; Winckler 2006; Al-Lamki 1998; Al-Aali 2006). Forstenlechner (2010) explains that the unique dependence on expatriate labor – both blue collar and white collar – continues to grow. In response, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, have worked on nationalization strategies known as ‘gulfization’ (Al-Lamki 2000; Metcalfe 2011), to reform their labor market (Al-Ali 2008). The Gulf Cooperation Council states have worked on the formulation of labor market strategies to improve their economic situation through the nationalization of labor, that is referred to, depending on the country, as Bahrainization, Saudization, Omanization, Emiratization, Kuwaitization and Qatarization (Kapiszewski 2006; Ele, 2018). There are several strategies adopted in every GCC state to encourage national participation which range among taxes, quotas and wage subsidy that have been described as “interventionist” or “quantitative approaches”. Nationalization strategies within Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) need to consider “softer” approaches or “qualitative” approaches to increase national labor participation. The coming sections of the paper explore “culture” as a qualitative approach towards increasing and retaining nationals in the private sector.

Literature Review

Nationalization programmes in the Gulf Corporation Countries (GCC) rely heavily on setting quotas. Measures to curb the growth of foreign workers include mandated targets for “nationalization” in different employment sectors, permitting requirements and levy fees for foreign workers, and attractive incentives and preferential treatment for companies adhering to nationalization policies (Maloney 1998; Ruppert 1998; Mashood and Veroheaven 2009). The various government labor nationalization policies are yet to achieve their goals as unemployment rates remain in the double figures in all GCC states (Forstenlechner 2008). The measures and restrictions imposed, such as the sponsorship system and the rotational system of expatriate labor to limit the duration of a foreigners’ stay, have not brought the expected results (Kapiszewski 2006). The literature contains ample evidence that GCC nationals find it unacceptable that the private sector’s working conditions consist of long and irregular hours, restrictions on time spent on cultural and religious observances, short periods of leave, and a disciplined approach to employee performance (Abdelkarim and Ibrahim 2001; Al-Enezi 2002; Ali 2004; Al-Lamki 1998; Al-Mansory 2003; Kapiszewski 2003; Madhi and Barrientos 2003; Willoughby 2005). Farrell (2004) suggests that there is a need to re-evaluate human resource strategies, recognizing the need for increased consideration of cultural sensitivity in terms of



workplace conditions, performance-related remuneration and awards, fast-track career development programmes, and career counseling. Stricter regulation seems to be an unlikely option; rather, the government needs to move towards adopting a softer approach (TANMIA 2006; AMEInfo 2007a, 2007b). Fasano et. al. (2003) believe that GCC governments are aware of the drawbacks of a quick localization of the labor force, and have now moved towards focusing on long-term structural solutions for retraining and educational reforms to meet medium- and long-term skill demands.

The author has explored the challenges within nationalization in Bahrain in previous contexts in previous publications discussing the areas resistance to nationalization, the role of education towards strengthening nationalization, and the formation of HRD strategies within the private sector. The current paper shall explore the perspective of importance of adapting softer approaches towards nationalization strategies. The literature review has explored the nationalization strategies challenges and reasons for its low percentage rates. The paper focuses in exploring nationalization strategies within a cultural framework owing to limited research in this area. The paper explores the context of one GCC state, the Kingdom of Bahrain.

The importance of having cultural sensitive strategies is not a challenge within the GCC countries only. Studying the context of China, it is revealed that localization has become a major concern for many foreign firms operating in China, as the future success of foreign firms depends on building strong local management teams (Jones 1997; The Economist Intelligence Unit 1997; Worm et al. 2001). Wong and Law (1999), state that localization in China is effective only if local managers are competent to perform the jobs originally performed by expatriates. Foreign firms in China are faced with localization challenges of recruitment, development and the retention of competent and high-performing Chinese managers (Child 1991, 1994; Osland and Cavusgil 1996; Wong and Law 1999). Foreign firms operating in China find it hard to implement their headquarters' human resource management practices in their Chinese subsidiaries, owing to the lack of localizing management practices (Kidd et al. 2001). Many Chinese employees find it easier to interact with local managers instead of expatriate managers because they share a common language, as well as cultural background. The expatriate may be technically proficient, but they lack the communication, development and management skills within the culture to pass on their wisdom to their designated successor (Furst 1999; Lynton 1999; Melvin and Sylvester 1997). There has been a failure to respond in a culturally appropriate manner (Osei-Hwedie, 1993).

Within the current nationalization context of the GCC, it may be challenging to have national managers only. In China, this revealed an important factor to be considered within nationalization strategies which is consideration of "culture".

Research Methodology

The research used a qualitative methodology through interviews. Five to eight managerial level interviews were conducted in each of the seven private organizations, where questionnaires were distributed, totaling to 38 interviewees. The interviews were conducted with managerial level employees; In addition, 28 interviews were conducted with government officials in managerial positions only. Hence, a total analysis of 66 interviews was completed and data findings are discussed in the paper.

As noted by managers in several instances, culture plays a major role in shaping nationals at work, specifically in the private education sector and the hotel sector. The interviews reflect the ‘blame’ towards the culture in shaping Bahrainis at work. According to managers in the private sector, culture plays a role in shaping Bahrainis’ working style and choice of sector to work in. Managers had negative views about Bahrainis’ working style, describing them as weak in commitment and dedication. In addition, the interviewees viewed Bahrainis as conservative regarding joining service sectors such as hotels and restaurants. Religion and facing the public in service jobs form major challenges with the Bahraini cultural mindset, as pointed out by interviewees. Even in cases where language is not a barrier towards facing customers, Bahrainis are hesitant to serve others. Bahrainis seem to be attached to office government jobs that may be viewed differently within their society, as stated during interviews.

Bahrainis were frequently described by private sector managers interviewed as not being ‘proactive’ and ‘committed’ towards their work, causing private sector managers to view their working style as a culture within their society. The characteristics of Bahrainis’ ‘working style’ that were viewed by private sector managers as forming resistance towards Bahraini employment were being ‘complainers’ and lacking ‘commitment’, ‘dedication’ and ‘proactivity’. Experiencing Bahrainis at work made managers blame the culture for shaping Bahrainis’ working style. Commitment, dedication and absenteeism are the phrases often used to describe Bahrainis and judged by managers to be ‘cultural’ aspects.

“Nationals are seen as “*Frequent complainers* and are *not open for additional load*. The reason is perhaps it has something to do with the *culture*.” (Administration Manager)

“There have been challenges with 70% of local teachers. The challenges are the *working style*. Their sense of *commitment and dedication* is far less than expatriates in terms of productivity and attendance. If they are not teaching they do not any research work or improve their work process. They would rather spend their time having a cup of coffee. This is probably of their *culture*.” (Vice Principal)



“I feel it is the *culture* that shapes Bahrainis towards looking for secured jobs in the government.” **(Head of Security)**

Managers who were interviewed described how the culture in the society does not support jobs in the service sector. The interviewees explained that Bahrainis seem to be hesitant to serve others, they avoid facing customers in restaurants and are reluctant to work in hotels for religious reasons. Hotels appear to be against religious values in terms of being place where alcohol is served, and which are not a respectful environment for females to work in, as reported by the interview data. Restaurants are avoided by Bahrainis in terms of serving other people since they feel reluctant to face customers. It is evident that service jobs such as waitressing or jobs in certain sectors such as hotels are not accepted by nationals as they are not encouraged by the culture within the society. The managers views quoted in this regard are as follows:

“Sometimes it not about the shortage of skills only in positions but finding a Bahraini to work as a *waitress* in a hotel has *cultural* barriers.” **(Security Manager)**

“The *culture* is a reason that they *do not want to serve* food as waiters in restaurants or fast food chains.” **(Assistant HR Manager)**

“Bahrainis *cannot accept* working in restaurants and shall not accept cleaning the bathrooms of the coffee shops they work in.” **(Acting Group HR Manager)**

“The challenges in recruiting Bahrainis are with the Bahrainis themselves. Females have *a religion and culture view* for working in a hotel.” **(Sales Manager)**

“The mindset of working in a hotel is a bad environment. Culture is not supporting jobs in the hotels.” **(Chief of Finance)**

The interview data reported that the mindset built into the culture looks down on jobs in the service sector, forming a challenge towards nationalizing positions in such sectors. Strengthening the cultural mindset challenge towards nationalization beyond the required work skills is further reflected in a **Restaurant Manager’s** explanation:

“Our approach is employing Bahrainis to converse in Arabic as most of our customers are Arabs and will be delighted if served by Arabs waiters. The issue with Bahrainis they are *hesitant* to take orders by

facing outside customers preferring to work inside in the kitchen but not face customers.”

Analyzing the Bahrainization challenge, it was worth examining whether the mindset of working in service jobs exists in uneducated categories in the society. On one hand, it appears that a cultural view towards certain jobs exist in certain categories of nationals such as high school leavers or the uneducated.

“The main challenge of Bahrainization is not all Bahrainis want to work in restaurants and cannot accept cleaning the retail places. Usually such difficulties are faced with *high school leavers*.” **(Payroll Manager)**

On the other hand, it is obvious that the same issue still exists in educated categories of nationals.

“The main issue we face is acceptance of jobs for Bahrainis. *Even those educated and trained* in BIRD institute do not want to work in our organization. They want office work only.” **(Fashion Operations Manager)**

The Bahrainis are affected by the cultural mindset of viewing an office job as giving them more status in the society. The culture seems to view nationals working in offices in a different manner than those who are working service jobs, as indicated earlier by the interviewees. This also strengthens views that were identified in the literature review in Chapter Two.

“Bahrainis are *hesitant to work in lower positions* in our organizations even though we very much support their growth. This is a result of the *culture*. They want to work in offices straight away.” **(Restaurant Manager)**

“Bahrainis *want to work in offices only* as they see it more rewarding and respectful among people.” **(Chief Accountant)**

It is noteworthy that managers pointed out that the culture is changing. Having Bahrainis working in service sectors encourages others to join and as such people will begin to view such positions positively, getting away from the built-in cultural mindset in Bahrain. The move towards a diversified economy that requires service and retail jobs is being accepted as Bahrainis realize that the new economy lacks opportunities in offices and requires the participation of Bahrainis in service sectors.



“Bahrainis percentages working in such areas have increased as see more of colleagues cleaning and working in such areas motivates them to work in our organization.” **(Restaurant Manager)**

“The culture and mentality of working in a hotel has changed. Bahrainis are open-minded compared to other GCC states and as Bahrainis we have developed in the hospitality sector compared to other GCC states but yet we need to improve further by putting Bahrainis in the front line jobs to reflect a positive culture.” **(Sales Manager)**

“The new generation is changing their views because they started studying that in schools or maybe they do not see opportunities in the government or big private companies.” **(Fashion Operations Manager)**

Conclusion

Culture in Bahrain is blamed by interviewees for its influence on nationals’ attitudes to work. They justify their views by blaming the culture and the way children are developed in schools, which does not build work ethic and values within them. Managers from both private and government sectors in Bahrain agree that Bahrainis are conservative when it comes to joining any service sector industries, such as hotels and restaurants, either for religious reasons, social status reasons or being hesitant to face customers. Therefore they continue to prefer working in an office environment. Educating nationals from an early age and teaching them work ethic and building in them that work values can overcome cultural barriers within their mindsets, is recommended by the interviewees. Managers justify their views by blaming the culture based on the way children are brought up in schools, which does not build work ethics and values within them. The findings reflect the views of Shaham (2009), Morris (2005) and Suliaman (2006), who described cultural barriers and indicated the need for culturally sensitive strategies as described by Farrell (2004).

However, the distinguishing challenge for Bahrain as indicated by government officials is that the population of young educated nationals has shown an increase in the numbers of Bachelor degree holders that are females. According to Ministry of Labor officials, creating jobs for national females is a challenge. Statistics for the year 2010 by the Central Informatics Organization in Bahrain indicated (see Appendix: source, Central Informatics Organization) that the population of Bahrain is mostly made up of nationals within the age range of 10–24, both females and males. Government officials explain a critical situation that in previous years,



unemployment used to lie within the uneducated national population, but the demographic has changed, and now the majority of unemployed people are female Bachelor's degree holders. Having cultural barriers within Bahrainization increases the pressure to achieve Bahrainization with a population of educated female nationals that have more cultural restrictions towards working in certain service sectors. The increase in females seeking employment was analysed through the unemployment support scheme, where, according to the December 2013 Ministry of Labor statistics, among the 1,401 nationals seeking unemployment support, 1,200 of them were female bachelor's degree holders and 171 were male bachelor's degree holders. However, government officials point out that the increase in female education is due to the lowering of university fees and change of cultural mindsets towards female higher education completion. According to 2013 data for job seekers whose unemployment case files have been dealt with by the recruitment office in the Ministry of Labor, there are 703 females bachelor's degree holders compared to 164 males bachelor's degree holders.

It is worth mentioning the change in management processes within Bahrainization is undertaken through Tamkeen strategies, aligned with the country culture and values, to create the sectors required by the economy and that are desirable to, and thus encourage, young graduates. For example, a Tamkeen market gap assessment led to the development of strategies to develop national human resources to enter jobs in the hotel, airline, logistics and customer service industries, as observed by the interviewees. Thus, Bahrainization has moved towards 'qualitative' approaches, yet it still needs to be strengthened in terms of better nominations for recruitment, enforcement of 'Bahrainization' of positions subject to qualitative interventions, more support for wage subsidy, and follow-ups about nationals career paths and retention strategies. The concern of private sector managers is to increase Bahraini labor participation through qualitative strategies. Their recommendations, in calling for more government support to Bahrainis their willingness to give up previous strategies that led to 'ghost workers' (Al-Qudsi 2005) and 'window dressing' (Farell 2004).



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APPENDIX

إجمالي السكان بحسب فئات السن والجنسية والنوع - تعداد ٢٠١٠
Population by Age Groups, Nationality and Sex - 2010 Census

Age Groups	Nationality / Sex / الجنسية / النوع									فئات السن
	Total / الجملة			Non-Bahraini / غير بحريني			Bahraini / بحريني			
	كلا النوعين Both Sexes	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	كلا النوعين Both Sexes	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	كلا النوعين Both Sexes	أنثى Female	ذكر Male	
0 - 4	89,020	43,783	45,237	25,282	12,522	12,760	63,738	31,261	32,477	٤ - ٠
5 - 9	82,925	40,360	42,565	23,913	11,625	12,288	59,012	28,735	30,277	٩ - ٥
10 - 14	75,658	36,767	38,891	17,474	8,425	9,049	58,184	28,342	29,842	١٤ - ١٠
15 - 19	72,713	35,391	37,322	13,056	6,256	6,800	59,657	29,135	30,522	١٩ - ١٥
20 - 24	112,402	46,033	66,369	57,526	19,416	38,110	54,876	26,617	28,259	٢٤ - ٢٠
25 - 29	182,232	55,403	126,829	134,073	31,915	102,158	48,159	23,488	24,671	٢٩ - ٢٥
30 - 34	161,448	50,080	111,368	119,374	29,102	90,272	42,074	20,978	21,096	٣٤ - ٣٠
35 - 39	131,729	41,134	90,595	97,842	23,808	74,034	33,887	17,326	16,561	٣٩ - ٣٥
40 - 44	106,196	34,819	71,377	72,865	17,536	55,329	33,331	17,283	16,048	٤٤ - ٤٠
45 - 49	81,471	29,168	52,303	48,510	12,046	36,464	32,961	17,122	15,839	٤٩ - ٤٥
50 - 54	60,575	20,984	39,591	33,087	6,820	26,267	27,488	14,164	13,324	٥٤ - ٥٠
55 - 59	35,149	12,105	23,044	15,751	3,211	12,540	19,398	8,894	10,504	٥٩ - ٥٥
60 - 64	16,819	6,801	10,018	4,762	1,233	3,529	12,057	5,568	6,489	٦٤ - ٦٠
65 - 69	9,626	4,686	4,940	1,336	458	878	8,290	4,228	4,062	٦٩ - ٦٥
70 - 74	7,719	4,033	3,686	666	302	364	7,053	3,731	3,322	٧٤ - ٧٠
75 - 79	4,435	2,299	2,136	363	179	184	4,072	2,120	1,952	٧٩ - ٧٥
80 - 84	2,683	1,404	1,279	184	85	99	2,499	1,319	1,180	٨٤ - ٨٠
85 +	1,771	907	864	108	58	50	1,663	849	814	+ ٨٥
Total	1,234,571	466,157	768,414	666,172	184,997	481,175	568,399	281,160	287,239	الجملة