

Arab Knowledge Sharing in a Multicultural Workforce: A Dual Case Study in the UAE

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Abstract

This article describes a multi-disciplinary study to assess the impact of Arab national culture on knowledge sharing attitudes towards foreign co-worker groups in the UAE. A dual case study, employing quantitative and qualitative empirical data, was adopted. The results show that Arab national culture has a counterproductive effect on knowledge sharing with foreign co-workers, due to heavy cultural emphasis on trust, 'wasta', status, power and strong social networks and informal communications, all of which are difficult to achieve with external temporary workers. Arab knowledge sharing attitudes were also found to differ amongst different co-worker groups; a result that conflicts with Hofstede's original findings on Arab culture's high collectivism score. The authors argue that an Arab KM model is therefore justified and offered in the form of a roadmap to guide senior management and minimise the 'wasta' effect.

Keywords: Knowledge Management (KM); Cross cultural; Arab culture; Wasta; Arab KM model; KM roadmap

Introduction

In the wake of a severe economic crisis and the slow depletion of natural resources in oil rich Arab countries, both Arab governments and organizations realize that they must adapt internally in order to sustain competitiveness. There is also an understanding that knowledge is one of the most valuable currencies that an organization owns. This recognition of the value of knowledge management (KM) contrasts with the report by the UNDP [1] which declares that the Arab region is deeply deficient in knowledge strategies. The importance of the UAE region as an international business hub creates the need for a resolution of this situation. Consequently, the UAE government launched several knowledge promoting initiatives [2,3] to combat such concerns in the region; this trend has been mirrored by a surge of literature on Arab knowledge management [2,4,5].

A key knowledge resource in any organization is people, so that maximizing the potential of human resources remains a key issue for the UAE. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is currently undergoing a domestic manpower crisis. In a bid to meet the human resources shortage, the UAE have an open economy model, which is inundated with expatriate and foreign workers who both live and work alongside their UAE Arab counterparts, creating a very unique business dynamic of high cultural diversity [6,7]. The key driver for high levels of foreign workers is the lack of necessary skills amongst the native workforce. The most common nationalities present with the UAE are other Arabs, American, British, European and all types of Asian nationalities [8]. The subsequent clash of cultures is often underplayed by the UAE authorities, and a number of past studies have indicated there may be a serious issue.

There is no doubt that the presence of foreign workers will continue at high levels, as the UAE continues to grapple with internal issues related to education, training and skills' shortages. To reduce this pattern of external dependency, the UAE has introduced a national knowledge strategy known as the 'Emirization program' which seeks to increase the proportion of UAE Arabs in the workforce via a series of incentives and policy changes. The aim is for UAE employees to form a significant proportion of an organization's workforce. This complex situation calls for research to establish a sound and credible Arab KM model.

The UAE scenario is one where the workforce is culturally diverse. The problem context revolves around the compatibility of Arab national culture with knowledge management initiatives and how best to facilitate KM in a multicultural setting. Pauleen and Murphy [9] concur, admitting that western ideas dominate KM research, and display naivety regarding the role of national culture in other settings.

Review of National Culture within the Km Literature

Hofstede [10,11], describes national culture as 'software of the mind', placing emphasis on cultural values, which he states is the predisposition to choose certain dealings or situations instead of others, but which is also made apparent in other ways, such as rituals and symbols. Hofstede [10] also offers a key cultural types theory which purports that national cultural differences occur across four key dimensions in the workplace: power-distance, Individualism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity.

Hofstede's [10] pioneering research on Arab national culture was obtained from samples of Arab participants from Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and other Arab countries. Using a scoring system for each dimension, he found Arab culture to have:

- A high power-distance score of 80: Indicating unequal distribution of power and wealth.

- A high uncertainty avoidance score of 68: Indicating Arab society's intolerance towards uncertainty.
- A low Individualism score of 38: Indicating a strong inclination towards groups or collectivism that manifests itself in strong kin relationships.
- An average Masculinity score of 52: Indicating that factors other than national culture (e.g. religion) may be responsible for strong gender differences within Arab society.

These scores, particularly when compared to the scores of western countries, show that Arabs have a very distinctive cultural mentality in the workplace, which may have strong ramifications for knowledge sharing. However, there is much conflict in the literature regarding the role of national culture on KM. One school of thought asserts that national culture does not affect KM [12]. Whilst another group believes that national culture affects KM, particularly with respect to tacit knowledge, which requires immense personal communication and culture to influence communication. Strong empirical evidence stems from studies that found a disparity amongst certain cultures in their willingness to share knowledge [13-16].

Mohamed et al. [3] assert that KM practices need to be adapted to the Arab culture, proposing a unique Arab KM model called nomadic KM, which emphasizes Arab preference for tacit knowledge sharing with those that they intensely trust and have long term relationships. Tlaiss and Kausar [17] assert that Arab culture is characterized by collectivism, whereby they use the family and social networks to help secure jobs. This phenomenon within Arab organizations is referred to as 'wasta' [17] and may indicate a preference for working within existing social networks. Similarly, Hutchings and Weir [18] state that these wasta networks are central to Arab business dealings and important for knowledge sharing.

The complex term 'wasta' has different connotations, both positive and negative. For Arabs who make use of the wasta, in a positive sense, it alludes to providing assistance or a stepping stone in the corporate world to overcome bureaucratic barriers [19]. It has also been described as 'who you know' [20,21] and 'shoulders'.

However, wasta also has some negative connotations, which are alluded to by the more secretive and underhand aspects of using a wasta, which are often seen as being corrupt in nature and described as 'pulling strings' [20]. In their study of wasta, Loewe et al. [22] found that it increases unfairness in decision making in the workplace. This is concurred by Mohamed and Hamdy [23] who state that it can lead to unqualified individuals obtaining jobs, which can lead to dissent and problems within the rest of the skilled workforce.

Although Barnet et al. [24] state that the using the wasta is viewed with pride, as it offers higher status and a feeling of being well connected, leading to intricate social exchanges within closed social networks.

Similar cultural behaviour has been identified in other countries e.g. 'guanxi' in China, 'jeitinho' in Brazil and 'svyazi' in Russia.

Moreover, Ahmad and Daghfous [25] assert that local large-size UAE businesses have struggled to create effective internal knowledge sharing strategies and initiatives, due to traditionalist views regarding KM, trust and security breaches [26].

As well as trust, other factors have been implicated, as Seba et al. [4] conducted a KM study on the UAE public sector and found that issues such as trust, leadership and technology usage, organizational culture

and time were key factors affecting knowledge sharing attitudes in an Arab setting. Skok and Tahir [5] examined the barriers associated with organizational knowledge sharing within the Arab world and their findings assert that knowledge barriers are due to organizational culture, training and a lack of commitment by management. However, all these studies do not differentiate between foreign co-workers and instead categorize 'foreign workers' as one homogeneous group, when in reality this is not the case. Foreign worker nationality does matter, as in Arab culture, performance is simultaneously weighted along with esteemed power and prestige of co-workers, often creating a hostile working environment [27].

Other authors have realized that Arab culture is intensely closed, owing to their unreceptive attitude towards expatriates, highlighting the need for greater synchronization and understanding between Arabs and foreign co-workers [28]. Whilst Jones [29] asserts that cultural insecurity represents a big issue for UAE citizens, and this affects their workplace behaviour as they act with 'self-preservation'. As for working preferences, Kuehn and Al-Busaidi's [30] study on Arab Omani workers and Asian expatriate workers in Oman found that Arab workers preferred to work in ethnocentric situations. The implications of this for knowledge management in a multicultural context are likely to be significant. Alserhan et al. [7] note that during their research on UAE workers' attitudes to diversity, workers seemed to group together culturally and disallow 'outsiders' and found no positive relationship between workforce diversity levels and UAE worker attitudes. Furthermore, they assert that expatriate workers in the UAE regularly hoard knowledge to ensure their job security. All these studies point towards the need for a customized solution.

However, Smedlund [31] states that the facilitation of tacit mutual exchange prevails in long-term social networks due to strong interpersonal links. Social network theory is used to investigate human interaction and how relationships are formed between individuals and groups of individuals. Understanding the nature of social networks is useful for any discussion on knowledge management, as according to Schultz-Jones [32], it is very beneficial when trying to ascertain information requirements. Social networks vary and can be either strong or weak in nature.

Feld et al. [33] demonstrate that in strong social networks, individuals interact on a frequent basis, feel more trust and closeness and interaction is more likely to be face-to-face. Then it is the nature of a social network evolves over time, as relationships begin to increase the number, frequency and nature of pre-existing links in a positive manner. Strong social networks enjoy greater levels of knowledge sharing due to the increased frequency and trust involved in their interactions.

Ojala [34] shows that with the widespread use of emerging technologies, online corporate social networking has become popular via tools such as corporate blogging which is beneficial to the organization as it helps to add a knowledge pool for research projects, industry and product information, external party news, as well as allowing for feedback via comment and tagging facilities. More importantly, he also asserts that blogging is particularly useful in a cross-cultural context, because it is informal and obstacles such as language and grammatical errors are not major issues, encouraging more openness. Therefore, corporate blogging may play an important role in capturing informal tacit knowledge, and form online social communities. It will be considered in this study.

Methodology

Study sample

A case study approach [35] was selected for an exploratory study in order to understand the rich context of the study. A dual multiple case study strategy was employed, in order to triangulate findings and increase the validity and wider applicability of findings. Two large and well established UAE construction companies were selected, and for the purposes of confidentiality were given the pseudonyms of 'Company A' and 'Company S'.

The target respondents were Arab UAE workers, in either a managerial or key personnel role, who could provide insight relating to Arab national cultural attitudes towards knowledge sharing with co-workers. Within both organizations, target respondents were selected across a range of departments and SBUs.

A multi-sampling method was adopting using both purposive and network methods, (both non-probability techniques). Initially, purposive sampling was used targeting specific individuals within the organizations who were considered as possessing the necessary insight. The purposive respondents were also asked to recommend other relevant employees, thus capitalizing on network sampling techniques [36] as the organizations were large and identifying potential respondents may have been problematic otherwise. The electronic questionnaires yielded a total of 40 responses from the two case organizations, with a response rate of 40%, while six personal interviews were conducted, and analyzed using content analysis.

Survey Instrument and Measures

The research was based on multiple data collection techniques, including both interviews (qualitative) and electronic questionnaires (quantitative) to help triangulate and guide data.

The survey was based on a hybrid assessment framework instrument, as a single framework was not sufficient to help answer the research questions (as it is based on two disciplines: KM and national culture), thus a customized and modified survey instrument was devised encompassing Hofstede's [10] cultural types and King's [36] framework for KM and culture related outcomes.

King's [36] conceptual framework was appropriate as it links the two key research variables (culture and KM). King [36] recommends that his model is used in conjunction with another framework that measures culture. Therefore, Hofstede's [10] framework on national culture, was deemed appropriate, when used simultaneously with King's [36] framework. Hofstede's cultural types studies [10,11] seek to measure national culture. Sondgaard [37] points out that Hofstede's work is methodologically strong, uses reliable data collection procedures and uses logical dimensions to help understand cultural and national differences.

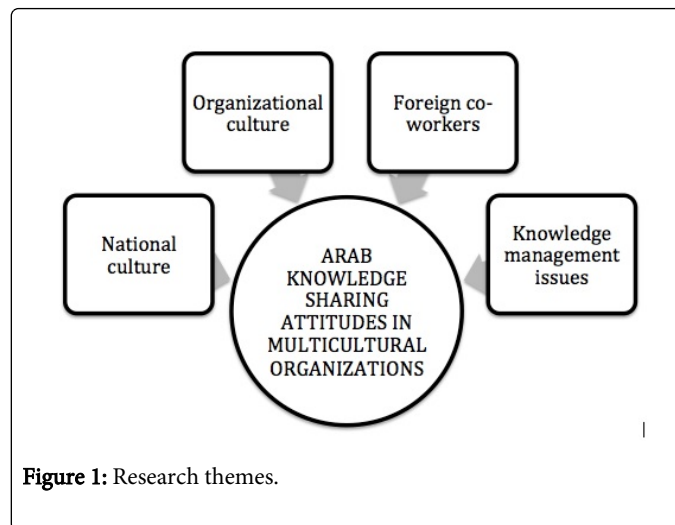


Figure 1: Research themes.

The synthesized survey instruments were prepared into a set of questions, which centered around four key research themes, as shown in Figure 1:

- National Culture: Uncertainty avoidance (Uncertainty, risk), Collectivism (social networks, trusts, status), Power distance (Status, 'Wasta', social networks)
- Organizational Culture: HR policies, management commitment, contract periods, etc.
- Foreign co-workers: KM and National culture questions regarding individual co-worker groups (UAE, western, Asian and non-UAE Arabs) were posed in order to ascertain any differences in attitudes towards particular co-groups.
- Knowledge Management issues: Attitudes towards KM, Improving KM and KM and technology.

Stage one involved electronic questionnaires being sent out via Survey Monkey, in order to highlight general Arab KM trends and provide indicative quantitative guidance on research worthy areas for further investigation. The questionnaire format was a mix of Likert scales and category style questions.

The second stage involved personal interviews, as Gerhart [38] asserts that national culture and associated cultural values are usually measured using questions to gauge the reaction of the participants. Semi-structured personal interviews were employed to obtain qualitative results. Considering that trust is key in Arab society [5], personal face-to-face interviews were the preferred delivery mode to build rapport and to be suited to the cultural needs of the chosen society.

The purpose of this research is to gain rich insight, using a qualitative approach. Basic statistics were used to highlight key issues, but the key measures were the descriptive and rich responses of the experts, which helped to gain a deep insight into Arab knowledge sharing attitudes.

Key Findings

Sample profile

A greater proportion of participants came from organization B (66%), and almost three quarters of the total sample were male. Managers, supervisors and white collar workers, were fairly equally represented in the sample, although senior managers only accounted for 5% of the sample. Half the sample fell in the younger age category (20-30), so the sample was well represented by older and younger employees alike shown in the Figure 2.

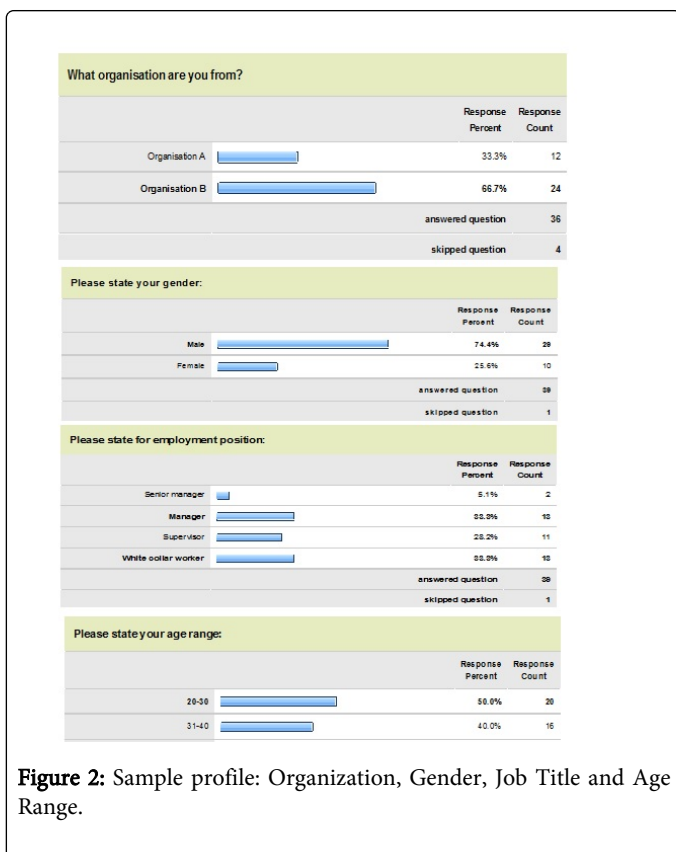


Figure 2: Sample profile: Organization, Gender, Job Title and Age Range.

Survey responses

When the sample was asked about their sentiments towards their foreign co-workers, 46.2% responded that their presence was a concern, while 25.6% felt intimidated. This suggests high levels of negative sentiment and a high level of uncertainty avoidance shown in the Figure 3.

The sample exhibited high levels of uncertainty avoidance with respect to foreign co-workers. When asked whether they would work with foreign co-workers, approximately 60% of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, when asked whether they hide knowledge from foreign co-workers for competitive reasons over 60% agreed or strongly agreed shown in the Figure 4.

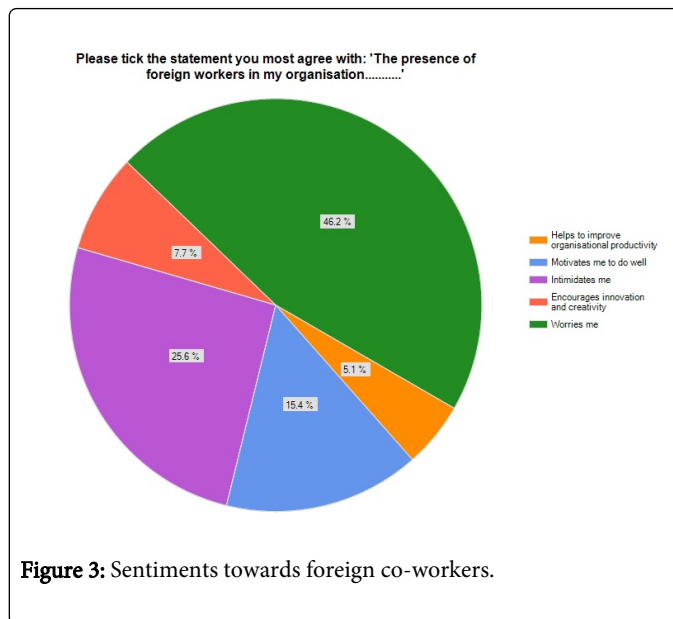


Figure 3: Sentiments towards foreign co-workers.

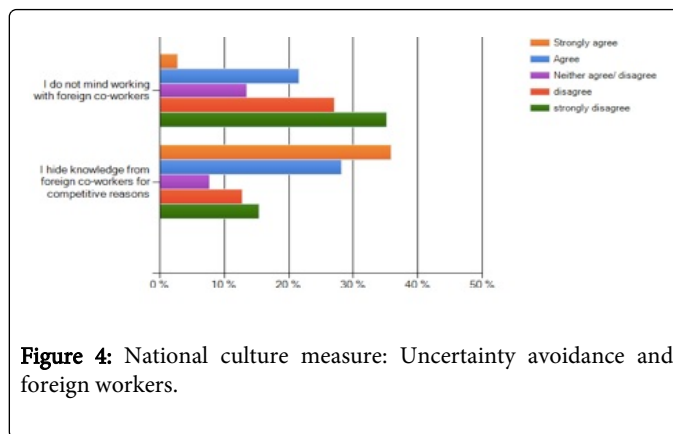


Figure 4: National culture measure: Uncertainty avoidance and foreign workers.

The pattern emerging from these results is that the sample shows high levels of uncertainty avoidance with regards to knowledge and knowledge sharing with co-workers, adopting a cautious approach.

High levels of individualism appears to occur with respect to foreign workers, as 74.4% of the sample felt either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the nationality of co-workers does not affect their ability to share knowledge, which suggest that co-worker nationality is an important consideration for the sample when deciding to share knowledge (Figure 5). While 67.5% of the sample disagreed or strongly disagreed that the quality of knowledge transfer and communication is high with foreign co-worker teams, suggesting inefficient knowledge sharing occurring with foreign co-workers teams shown in the Figure 5.

There were variations regarding the likelihood of the sample's willingness to share knowledge amongst different co-worker groups shown in the Figure 6. Highly noteworthy, is the sample's 100% affirmative response that they would be highly likely to share knowledge with their fellow UAE co-workers, indicating high collectivism with native UAE co-workers.

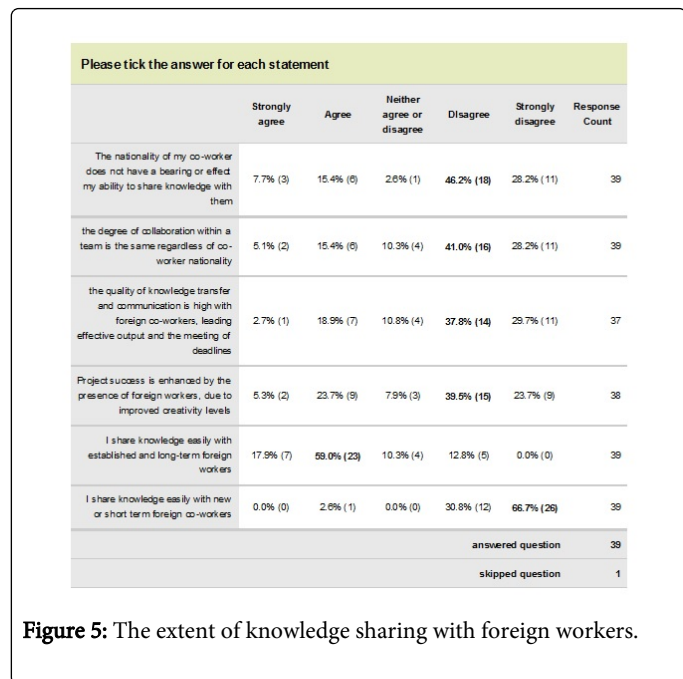


Figure 5: The extent of knowledge sharing with foreign workers.

However, this high collectivism attitude was not the same for all foreign co-worker groups. In fact some groups were more desirable than others with respect to knowledge sharing. The likelihood for sharing knowledge with western co-workers was most positive as 43.6% answered somewhat likely while 35% answered they would be very likely to share knowledge with foreign workers. Asian co-workers showed a different set of results. Over half the sample indicated it would be unlikely to share knowledge with Asian co-workers, indicating a much more ‘individualistic’ approach to social interaction with them. Regarding ‘other Arab co-workers’, almost half of the sample answered they would only be somewhat likely to share knowledge with other Arab workers, while 28.2% reported that they would be very unlikely to share knowledge with other Arab co-workers.

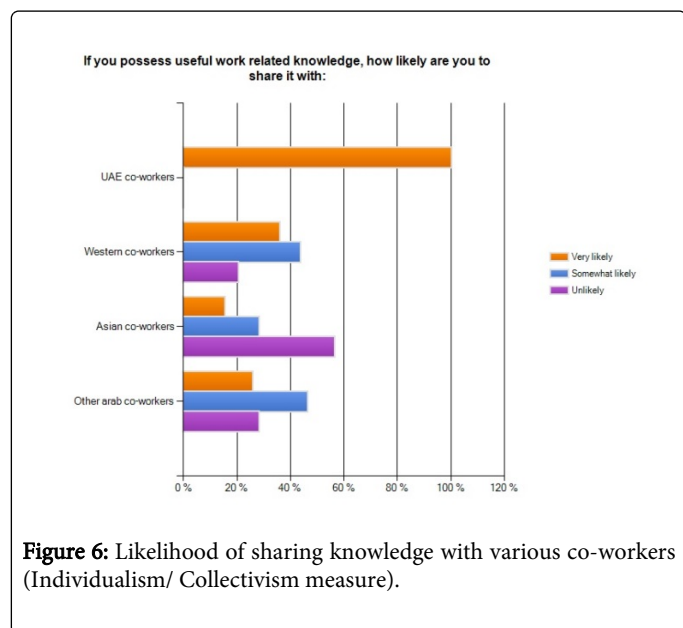


Figure 6: Likelihood of sharing knowledge with various co-workers (Individualism/ Collectivism measure).

There was a distinct difference between preferred communication modes between co-workers for sharing knowledge. The sample revealed that when communicating and sharing knowledge with fellow UAE co-workers, almost all preferred to do so via face-to-face informal conversation shown in the Figure 7. However, when dealing with foreign workers, more formal and recordable modes were preferred, such as official departmental meetings and emails, although the other Arab co-worker category enjoyed a higher face-to-face communication rate than other co-workers, possibly due to common language. Clearly, the sample shares knowledge with UAE co-workers and non-UAE co-workers in different ways.

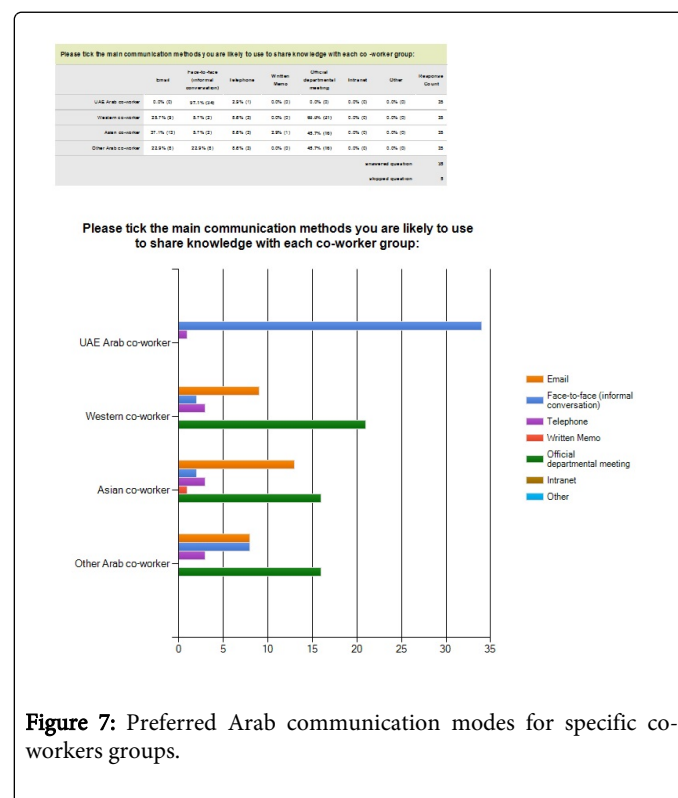


Figure 7: Preferred Arab communication modes for specific co-workers groups.

Significantly, all respondents felt there were insufficient on-site social areas on-site where co-workers could get together informally. 100% (disagreed or strongly disagreed) that the organization had made enough provisions to ensure good social interaction between all co-workers, indicating a major failing by the organization to create social synergy between co-workers and poor cross cultural management shown in the Figure 8.

Over half of the sample felt that the quality of collective learning was standard or mediocre, while 40% of the sample actually considered it low. This indicates a lack of organized activities and opportunities for collective learning by the organization shown in the Figure 9.

Almost half the participants rated the quality of collaborative problem solving as standard or mediocre, while the other half considered it low. This indicates a lack of organized KM activities.

There appears to be a distinct lack of virtual or online methods of knowledge sharing activities, as the main KM strategy employed were face-to-face discussion forums (97.4%) shown in the Figure 10.

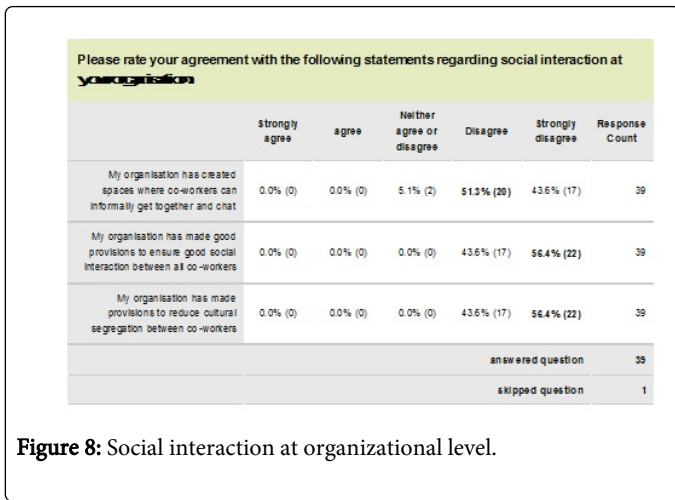


Figure 8: Social interaction at organizational level.

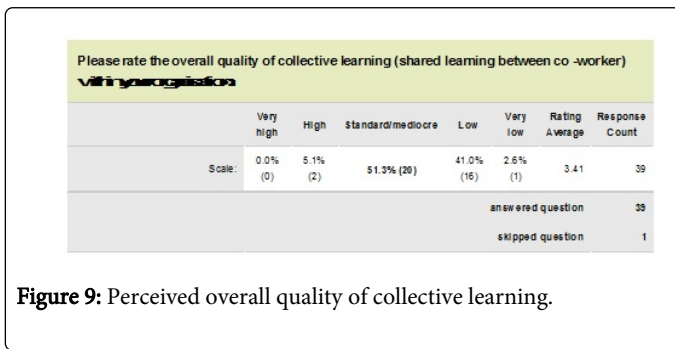


Figure 9: Perceived overall quality of collective learning.

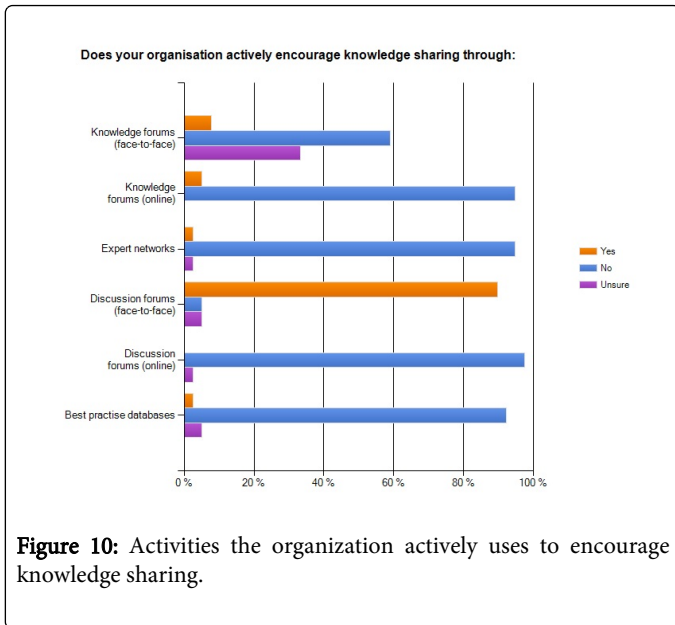


Figure 10: Activities the organization actively uses to encourage knowledge sharing.

Interview responses

Interview questions were based on the survey feedback. Six Arab UAE workers at managerial or white-collar level were interviewed either directly or via videoconferencing. Content analysis was undertaken on the interview transcripts, by coding responses of similar themes, and highlighting key trends and patterns shown in the Figure 11.

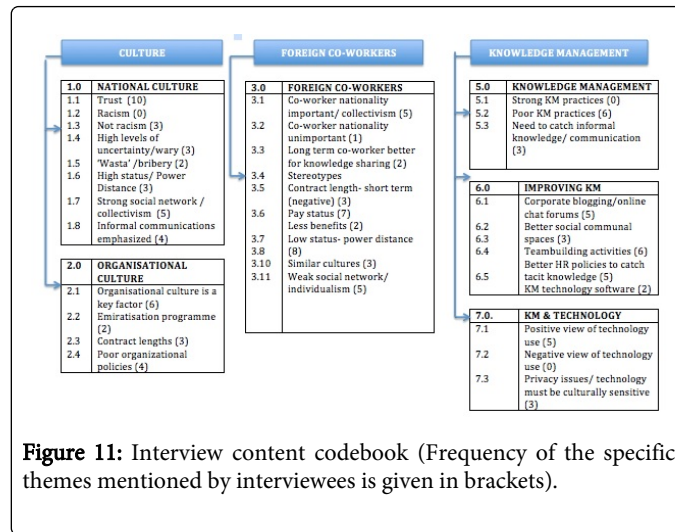


Figure 11: Interview content codebook (Frequency of the specific themes mentioned by interviewees is given in brackets).

Discussion

Overall, differences between the two organizations were minimal and displayed similar trends. The research findings mirrored Hofstede's [11] cultural types' research in most dimensions, with the exception of the collectivism dimension, which was found to contradict Hofstede's original scores, when measured in relation to foreign co-workers. This suggests that while Hofstede's research still remains pertinent, it may need to be re-evaluated in different contexts and multicultural settings.

Several key factors were found to negatively affect UAE workers attitudes to knowledge sharing with foreign co-workers. Thus, considering that the UAE workforce is highly multicultural, such issues need to be urgently resolved.

Arab National Culture: Not Totally Collectivist

Results for the collectivist dimension showed differing patterns when measured against UAE co-workers and foreign co-workers. Interaction with UAE co-workers mirrored Hofstede's high collectivism scores, although when interaction was measured with foreign co-workers high individualism was exhibited, contradicting Hofstede's score. A significant 95.8% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that their cultural values encouraged them to work in a group setting. There is no doubt that UAE Arabs are collectivists and prefer working in group situations as opposed to working alone, and this is the nature of Arabic culture. However, it seems that this collectivism only extends to fellow UAE co-workers, where strong social networks are already established. The empirical results suggest that UAE Arab collectivism does not appear to extend to foreign co-workers with whom they interact on a more individualist basis, as almost 95% of the sample felt their culture did not encourage easy free mixing in groups with strangers or foreigner, and therefore their collectivist nature can be said to occur only in situations where they are either with people from their own culture (where they have strong social networks). Rather they appear to show selfish individualistic behaviour with foreign workers, as 60% of the survey sample reported that they hide knowledge from their foreign co-workers.

This is an interesting finding, as Hofstede's original research did not test their collectivism in a multicultural setting. Rather it appears that

with respect to foreign co-workers, Arabs are not collectivist, rather they appear to exhibit greater signs of individualism. The reasons for this difference will now be explored.

The Value of Social Networks in the Arab Workplace

The strength of social networks seems to be a key factor in attitudes to knowledge sharing. Survey results showed that UAE Arab workers were 100% likely to share knowledge with their fellow UAE Arab workers, and indicate high levels of collectivism. However, knowledge sharing levels with foreign workers in general appear to be far lower, with far higher levels of individualism being exhibited. This can be partly attributed to the national culture dimension of high power-distance, whereby Arabs do not mind if power is distributed unequally and use knowledge sharing for their own gain i.e. the classic 'Knowledge is Power' syndrome.

Knowledge sharing seems to be used as a pawn or power card in order to achieve status and power. This is supported by Seba et al. [4] who state that knowledge is only shared if it is beneficial for the individual. For UAE Arabs, there is a great attraction to sharing knowledge with their fellow UAE counterparts, who are part of established social strong networks. Interviewee C explains:

I don't like to use the word racism, I would say it's more linked to status and alliances, as they will achieve higher status, gain greater advantages and 'wasta' if they mix well with their fellow UAE co-workers, as they usually have a lot of influence and connections, whereas foreign co-workers hold little influence'.

Thus, maintaining relations with fellow UAE co-workers helps one to progress and grow in reputation and status, and thus dissolves sentiments that Arabs may be racist, as rather it shows that they merely prefer to work within their own strong social networks, where they can attain greater benefits.

Arab Workers are seemingly selective with whom they share their knowledge, and seem to use co-worker nationality as an indicator of power or status, e.g. the majority of Arab UAE workers use co-worker nationality as the main criterion.

Trust

The notion of trust was a recurring theme in both the survey and the interviews. 94.9% of the survey sample agreed that their cultural values place a strong emphasis on trust and long term relationships in knowledge sharing, which indicates these are essential prerequisites for knowledge sharing in the Arab world. Literature supports this as it asserts that trust is one of the cornerstones upon which Arabian culture appears to be built [3-5]. When asked why UAE Arab co-workers were most preferred:

I would attribute the main reason to trust. The whole Arab world works on trust and longstanding connections, and usually foreign co-workers have not been here long enough to build up a strong trust and rapport'. (Interviewee E).

This explains the strong preference by the UAE workers to work with fellow UAE Arab workers:

'Birds of a feather flock together'. (Interviewee A)

As trust is a central theme of Arab culture, it appears that a lack of time to build up trust with foreign workers attributes to high levels of uncertainty avoidance with regards to foreign co-workers, and is

corroborated by the empirical evidence which found over 70% of the sample felt worry or risk in relation to the presence of foreign co-workers in the organization.

Organizational Culture

The role of organizational culture was found to have a negative impact on KM attitudes and knowledge sharing levels, manifesting itself in three ways: lack of supporting KM policies (temporary contracts and employee remuneration), the physical layout of the organization (lack of areas for social interaction) and poor human resource management of cultural policies (lack of teambuilding and social networking activities):

'They treat different co-workers differently because it seems the organization itself treats them differently in terms of pay status, contract length, etc. In fact the emirization program by the government encourages extra remuneration for UAE Arab workers. This has an effect on how UAE Arabs view them as they are very reputation and status orientated' (Interviewee E).

This difference in the treatment of foreign and UAE workers, is a problem throughout the entire UAE. The UAE's open economy, which allows foreign workers to readily take up employment, has fairly lax employment laws, and makes it easy to for organizations to offer temporary contracts with a high foreign worker turnover. Secondly, the 'Emirization program', which offers preference to UAE workers, further reinforces the power and status imbalance between foreign and UAE co-workers, instantly putting foreign workers at a disadvantage in the workplace by securing higher wages and providing preferential posts for UAE citizens.

Moreover, co-workers are not viewed as a homogeneous group in relation to knowledge sharing, rather there were differences found and organizational culture policies seem to exacerbate this issue:

Asian co-workers appeared to be the least preferred foreign co-worker for sharing knowledge, for example:

'They are usually hired to fill low jobs cheaply, as their wages are lower than UAE workers, this creates low respect for them' (Interviewee A).

Thus in Arab society where a lot of emphasis is placed on status and trust, it appears that establishing social networks with them is seen not to be beneficial due to their lack of power and influence within the organization. Western co-workers seemed to be the most preferred foreign co-worker for knowledge sharing, and the interview data was able to offer greater insight as to why:

'Western worker hold a lot of senior positions, they are respected as they have some weight and power in the organization.' (Interviewee F).

In terms of influence and status, they appear to be the most highly regarded of the foreign workers, due to the high ranking positions they take up; this makes it more desirable and attractive to share knowledge with them, owing to their higher influence in the workplace.

Other Arab foreign co-workers from surrounding Arab countries such as Egypt, and Lebanon, seemed to be slightly less preferred than western co-workers. The common reason cited for this was:

'it can work both ways (with other Arab workers), they can either be trusted a lot as they are similar to us culturally, or they can be treated like an outsider due to lower pay status, etc.' (Interviewee A).

This is surprising, as one would assume that other Arab workers would automatically be accepted in the same way that other UAE Arab workers are, but in practice we have a paradoxical situation, suggest that lack of acceptance is not down to racism, but more about status, power and beneficial social networks.

In both of the organizations sampled, there seems to be a distinct lack of any formal KM strategy and seemingly poor levels of management commitment in terms of supporting organizational policies and initiatives. Furthermore, management have failed to address the internal knowledge vacuum occurring as foreign workers exit the organization:

'The foreign workers have fixed short to long term contracts, and when they leave the organization they take their knowledge with them. We have no way of extracting knowledge, except from official documents they leave behind.' (interviewee A).

This creates a dilemma, as trust is a fundamental part of Arabian culture. However, foreign workers' contract periods usually do not allow sufficient time for strong social networks to be established, leading to loss of valuable tacit knowledge on their departure.

The recruitment process in general in the UAE is a fairly unique one, where UAE citizens are given precedence in issues of employment and pay, and this is part of the UAE governments strategy to bridge the skills and employment mismatch occurring within their country, and their 'Emirization program' is at the forefront of this strategy, providing organizations with incentives to employ UAE nationals. This automatically seems to create issues regarding equality and status within Arab organizations, and may impact workers ability to share knowledge and interact well.

'I think organizational culture is not conducive to welcoming foreign co-workers'

(Interviewee E).

Their recruitment process particularly seems to impact knowledge sharing with Asian co-workers:

'Little social interaction occurs with Asian co-workers as their power, pay and status is low within the organization' (Interviewee F).

Therefore, the organization's recruitment process exacerbates poor knowledge sharing in Arab organizations. However, this is the nature of the open economy in the UAE, where temporary contracts have become the norm, the recruitment aspect of organizational culture is fixed.

Policies and provisions to improve the frequency and likelihood of social interaction between foreign workers does not seem to be a priority, as 100% of the survey sample felt that the organization did not make enough provisions to reduce cultural segregation amongst workers:

'Social networks are weak because the organization is used to just having a high turnover of foreign workers, so it doesn't invest in improving social ties and interaction between co-workers via proper policies.' (Interviewee A).

Physical office layout can also discourage social gathering. Although 95% of the sample considered there were some communal areas where co-workers can informally get together and chat, while the researchers observed that when they did congregate, it was in culturally similar groups.

'The organization needs to change its whole approach, as at the moment they seem to segregate. They need to re-think their recruitment process and prevent social segregation by encouraging informality, by creating better social areas for staff.' (Interviewee D).

Therefore the poor physical layout of the organization, serve to weaken social networks between co-workers, which will have a negative impact on knowledge sharing as it reduces the frequency and opportunity for informal communications to occur.

Organizational culture when intertwined with national culture is a powerful catalyst in driving negative knowledge sharing attitudes with foreign co-workers. Foreign workers on temporary contracts serve to weaken social networks within the workplace, preventing the establishment of long term relationships. Also the Emirization program fosters inequality in the workplace and increases the power distance levels (a national culture measure) within the organization. Thus, the organizational culture in these firms seems to reinforce typical Arab national culture characteristics of high power distance.

Arab Culture: A Tendency towards Informal Communications

There was a strong tendency from UAE Arab workers to share knowledge with their fellow UAE Arab co-workers in face-to-face private conversations, which indicates an innate or natural tendency towards informal communication, and this is supported by Mohamed et al. [3]. This is a key factor for consideration in any Arab knowledge management model.

However, with foreign co-workers the mode of communication associated with knowledge sharing differs and seems more formalized, occurring via official departmental meeting or emails. Therefore a successful Arab KM model should also promote informal communications methods.

Proposed Arab Km Model

Any Arab KM model will certainly need to respectfully embrace Arab national culture, in a culturally sensitive way in a bid to avoid ethnocentrism.

The major factors which impact knowledge sharing attitudes have been identified, thus helping to inform the creation of an Arab KM model (see Figure 12). The Arab model is presented in two phases. Phase one involves the identification of key associated CSFs for successful knowledge sharing within a multicultural workforce. Phase two is the implementation strategy and consists of establishing the groundwork e.g. by undertaking a knowledge audit within the organization and engaging with staff at all levels in managing change in the working styles. The two phase diagram can be viewed as a roadmap to guide senior management in developing a credible KM strategy in an Arab setting. The key factor is to minimize 'wasta', the Arab propensity that discourages open knowledge sharing. The model proposes initiatives built around the need to strengthen social networks, develop the creative use of technology e.g. by the use of corporate blogging. The aim is to reinvigorate human resources policies to enable the capture of tacit knowledge, leading to a 'knowledge culture' as purported by [39].

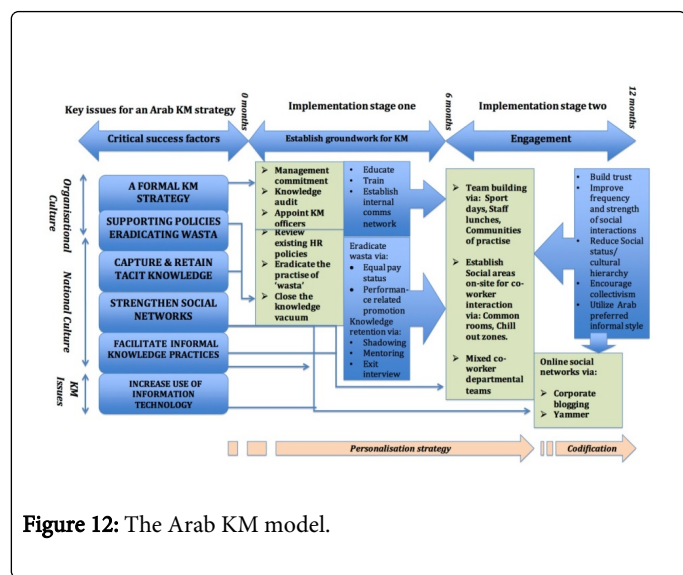


Figure 12: The Arab KM model.

An Arab KM strategy must be centered around a personalisation strategy [40], due to the strong emphasis Arab national culture places on social bonds.

One of the key ways to overcome issues related to trust and status issues is to strengthen the social networks between UAE and foreign co-workers, to increase trust and dissipate conflicting status issues. In this regard, a recurring theme which was often offered as a solution by interviewees was the introduction of teambuilding initiatives.

'Social networks are weak because the organization doesn't invest in improving social ties and interaction. Teambuilding activities and the creation of common rooms, and online chat rooms' will help (Interviewee A).

The reliance of UAE firms on fixed-term outsourced workers to fill the skills gap is likely to discourage investment in costly teambuilding initiatives. The cost of teambuilding activities will be outweighed by the benefit of capturing valuable tacit knowledge which is difficult to reproduce. Therefore, teambuilding, sports days and more inviting common spaces should be an intrinsic part of any Arab KM strategy.

The tacit knowledge vacuum is another key area that an Arab KM model should address. Mohamed et al. [3] concur as they assert that there is a pressing need for Arab firms to capture the knowledge of their foreign and expatriate workers, who are certain to depart. Any Arab KM policy must ensure policy reform in order to support KM initiatives:

'I think that before foreign workers leave they need to be shadowed for two months or so prior to their departures, so that their informal ideas and knowledge can be passed onto another member of existing staff.' (Interviewee F).

Reforms to KM policies for those on fixed term contracts should be implemented such as shadowing, mentoring and exit interviews to capture tacit knowledge.

Technology can play a key role in helping to capture informal tacit knowledge. Hansen et al. [40] concluded that a successful KM strategy should be a combination of personalization and codification strategies. Currently, the evidence suggests poor use of technology in Arab organizations with respect to knowledge sharing. A recurring theme in the interviews was the possibility of corporate blogging to provide a

platform for sharing information; this approach is aligned with the preferred informal communication style of Arab staff:

'As a lot of us are young we are really into blogging, and just like Facebook, the organization should create an internal social network, and allow workers to blog and I think the organization would be able to get a lot of work related knowledge that perhaps they wouldn't get in a official departmental meeting.' (Interviewee E).

As well as encouraging Arab workers to share knowledge informally, this can help to capture both fixed contract workers' knowledge in a permanent, explicit and re-usable form.

'Technology is a good icebreaker, and may help to dissipate a lot of the hang-ups and reservations that UAE workers may have, owing to their lack of trust. It may actually be easier for them to share knowledge online than in person' (Interviewee C).

Skok et al. [41-43] have shown how Yammer, which is an internal Facebook-type system can improve informal knowledge sharing in an international organization.

This tool has the ability to remove physical barriers to communication, such as co-worker nationality. The Arab KM model aims to understand the drivers and obstacles in a multicultural setting and to find culturally sensitive routes to deliver effective knowledge sharing.

Final Thoughts

This study, using empirical field evidence has been able to build upon existing literature and offer new insight into Arab KM and knowledge sharing attitudes towards foreign co-workers.

There is no doubt the dynamics in the UAE Arab workplace are still very much governed by traditional Arab national culture, as Arab culture was seen to have a negative effect on knowledge sharing with foreign co-workers, as it places a lot of emphasis on trust, status, power and strong social networks and informal communication, all of which are difficult to attain with foreign workers who only join the organization for a fixed period contract.

Differences in knowledge sharing between UAE workers and other foreign co-worker groups were highlighted, due to unequal distribution of power in the workplace (high levels of power-distance), which supports Hofstede's [10] original study. In particular western co-workers seemed to be the most preferred group for knowledge sharing, while Asian co-workers were the least preferred. These differences stems from the importance in Arab national culture of status and power. Secondly, it was discovered that although UAE Arabs exhibit high levels of collectivism between themselves, they simultaneously exhibited high levels of individualism with foreign co-workers, which is contrary to Hofstede's findings on Arab national culture.

Organizational culture was also found to be reinforcing existing Arab knowledge sharing attitudes. In particular, recruitment processes, lack of appropriate KM policies and the physical layout of the organization, all acted as obstacles to productive knowledge sharing.

Using the research finding, a two-phased model for an Arab KM strategy was proposed. The first stage identifies critical success factors, while the second stage provided guidance on how to implement the required initiatives in a culturally sensitive way.

- Strengthening of social networks
- Integrating informal knowledge sharing practices
- Increasing the use of informal technology via blogging
- Introducing a formal KM strategy with supporting policies

Despite the model being in its infancy, it is anticipated that this research will be of use to Arab organizations within the UAE, or indeed multinationals operating within an Arab context. The model provides a roadmap for the development of a successful strategy for knowledge creation, management and sharing within an Arab setting.

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