

Convergence or Diversity in National Recruitment and Selection Practices: A Case Study of the State of Qatar

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This paper examines the convergence and diversity in approaches to national HRM practices in Qatar. The sample of the study consists of 31 human resources managers working for different Qatari companies. Large companies and small to mid-size companies were included in the sample. The findings show that half of the Qatari companies have developed very detailed recruitment plans for the coming five years. The results also demonstrate that the Qatari companies used valid criteria in formulating these plans. In addition, most of the companies included in the survey encourage 'buying your own employees' as a recruitment policy, and rely equally on both internal and external recruitment. Furthermore, most of the HR managers indicated that their organizations target native men and women. Moreover, the results exemplify some more important findings relating to the recruitment policies being used in Qatari companies.

INTRODUCTION

The comparative Human Resource Management (HRM) literature has painted two pictures of national HRM practices. The first one assumes convergence toward the Anglo-American model around some form of global 'best practice'. The other alternative explanation stresses the significant factors that differentiate between national employment systems and practices (Williams, et al., 2009). A number of studies have investigated the convergence and diversity approaches, such as Katz and Darbishire (2000), who examined the telecommunications and motor industries in the US, the UK, Australia, Germany, Japan, Sweden, and Italy. Another recent study in this field was undertaken by Marginson and Sisson (2004); they examined the variation and commonalities in different employment sectors across European countries.

The aforementioned studies have explored the convergence and diversity issues in so-called developed countries, and since it is widely acknowledged that HRM policies and practices are influenced by the state (Scott, 2000), different types of regime needed to be investigated. One type of regime that has received less attention is what Ashton et al. (1999) refer to as the 'developmental state'. In this type of regime, the state exercises a significant influence on employment practices through direct intervention in the economy and the labour market (Ashton, et al., 2000; Ashton, 2004). Qatar can be best described as a 'developmental state', since the state owns most of the productive and important sectors of the country and the government plays a dominant role in creating employment (Al-Horr, 2010). Therefore, the current

study examines the recruitment and selection practices in Qatar as part of a project in progress to investigate the convergence and diversity in national approaches to HRM practices as a valid case study of the developmental state model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One view of the convergence of HRM holds that a specific set of employment practices are applicable across all organizations, all sectors, and all geographical locations. Gilmore (2009) refers to this view as 'the universal approach'. Among the most common set of the 'best' HRM practices that are applicable to all organizations and settings, regardless of their industry, location, or culture, is Pfeffer's (1998) list of the seven dimensions that enable systems to produce profits for people. This list includes:

Employment security; selective hiring of new personnel; self-managed teams and decentralization of decision making as the basic principles of organizational design; comparatively high compensation contingent on organizational performance; extensive training; reduced status distinctions and barriers, including dress, language, office arrangements, and wage differences across levels, [and], extensive sharing of financial and performance information throughout the organization. (Pfeffer, 1998, pp.64-65)

This list is not exclusive. Becker and Gerhart (1996) state that within the best practices approach, there is no consensus among researchers regarding what constitutes a high performance HR strategy. Nevertheless, there are some similarities running across most of the different HRM interventions (Gilmore, 2009). The most commonly cited techniques, according to Williams et al. (2009), are extensive training, decentralized team-working, sophisticated recruitment and selection practices, extensive communication with employees, and relatively high pay-for-performance.

The universal approach has been criticized for neglecting the external factors, such as legislation, culture, and employment relations structures, that affect the nature of HRM practices (Gilmore, 2009). Paauwe and Boselie (2007) argue that each institutional setting requires its own unique HRM model. Brewster (2004) adds that, despite the concept of HRM having been created and developed in the US, the relevance of that model in other parts of the world is open to investigation since it is unrealistic to assume that the US model can be simply transferred to different settings. Williams et al. (2009) classify the explanations for the diversity in national HRM practices into two streams. The first is the 'institutionalist' approach, which argues that distinctive institutional frameworks, such as political, legal, educational, and business systems, in different countries lead to variation in employment systems and HRM practices. Those who subscribe to this view suggest that even the most efficient model cannot be replicated outside its institutional context. One of the influential explanations of the various institutional contexts is the so-called 'varieties of capitalism' approach (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Scholars have identified a number of different types of capitalism. For instance, Amable (2003) lists five different models of capitalism:

The market-based economies; social-democratic economies; Asian capitalism; Continental European capitalism, [and] South European capitalism. (Amable, 2003, pp.102-103)

The other explanation for the diversity in national HRM practices described by Williams et al. (2009) is the 'culturalist' approach. One of the most widely referenced approaches for analyzing variations among cultures is Hofstede's framework (Robbins and DeCenzo, 2008). Hofstede (2001) identified five value dimensions that vary across borders and influence the organization of work in these countries. These dimensions are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, and long- versus short-term orientation. The core argument in the studies that have cultural orientation is that cultural differences likely to affect the success or failure of the techniques are avoided in the best practice model.

The recruitment and selection literature recommends starting the process by reviewing the need for labor and conducting a job analysis to develop clear job and person specifications (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004; Ballantyne, 2009). The literature emphasizes the importance of conducting a thorough human resource need analysis that precisely forecasts the labor demand and supply to determine any labor surplus or shortage (Noe, et al., 2008). As to the recruitment sources and methods, a recent survey by CIPD concluded that the most effective methods for attracting candidates were reported to be the organization's own corporate website and recruitment agencies. However, compared with past years, there is a tendency to reduce reliance on recruitment agencies and to expand the use of new media and technology to recruit (CIPD, 2010). Interestingly, the survey highlighted that, currently, more organizations are focusing on developing talent in-house and retaining rather than recruiting talent compared with the past. As to selection, competency-based interviews, interviews following the contents of the CV/application form, and structured interviews were the most common methods used to select applicants. The reliance on general ability tests has fallen although the use of tests for specific skills, literacy and/or numeracy remains constant (ibid., 2010).

Having illustrated the common practices in recruitment and selection, it is critical to highlight that some authors argue that this conventional notion of 'best practices' in recruitment and selection may be problematic in some industries or labor markets (Lockyer and Scholarios, 2004). Countries have different characteristics for their labor markets; however, some countries, especially European and North American countries, have received more attention in the comparative HRM research, while other countries, such as the countries from the Middle East region, are almost entirely absent.

In the Middle East, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which include Qatar, have similar sets of labor market characteristics. All GCC countries are adopting an open door policy to foreign workers to satisfy the increased demand for labor (Fasano and Goyal, 2004). According to Sassanpour et al. (1997), the labor markets in these countries are highly segmented. They are segmented between the public and the private sector, between indigenous and expatriate workers, and between skilled and unskilled workers. This segmentation is evident in the financial and non-financial benefits between the public and the private sector and in the higher pay for nationals, even when foreigners have comparable qualifications and skills. The segmentation can also be noted in the sectors in which nationals and expatriates are employed. Harry (2007) argues that the governments are the employers of 'first' and 'final' resort for citizens, while the majority of the huge number of expatriates are employed in domestic service or unskilled jobs, mostly in the private sector. Finally, this situation is enforced by the mismatch between the qualifications of the new entrants to the labor market and the requirements of businesses, which leads to further segmentation in the labor market whereby expatriates occupy highly specialized technical positions and low-skilled manual jobs, while nationals tend to be attracted to administrative positions (Fasano and Goyal, 2004; Sassanpour, et al., 1997).

Moreover, the legal frameworks governing the labor market in the GCC states have several similarities. For example, there is no minimum wage legislation and no tradition of collective bargaining, there are no trade unions, and employers set the wages. As a result, the government controls all aspects of industrial relations in these countries (Alzalabani, 2004; Fasano and Goyal, 2004; Sassanpour, et al., 1997; Ruppert, 1999). Fasano and Goyal (2004) add that a relatively flexible labor framework where workers are hired on limited-duration work assignments based on sponsorship systems are usually applied to foreign labor. Yet, expatriates, especially from Asia and Arab countries other than GCC states, are attracted to work in the GCC countries because their expected earnings are higher than in their home countries.

Having established the situation in the previous paragraphs, the current research now considers recruitment and selection practices in Qatar as a contribution to the comparative HRM literature.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A sample of 31 was drawn from human resources managers working for different Qatari companies. All were working for local companies in Doha, Qatar. Inclusion in the sample required that the

respondents be HR managers involved in handling the responsibility of processing the HR functions. To increase the response rate, researchers conducted face to face personal interviews to fill out the questionnaires. The procedures resulted in 31 completed questionnaires with a response rate of 82%. Of the 31 usable questionnaires, all respondents identified themselves as Qatari nationals who were HR managers with 3-8 years service in the same post. Overall, the sample was primarily aged 20-42, with 72% married and 28% single, and as regards level of education, 59% held college degrees.

An extensive questionnaire in English was drafted for the study. This included several scales (examples: very important, important, unimportant; high, medium, low; and yes, no) to measure a wide range of recruitment and selection functions. The main areas covered in this study are recruitment plans, recruitment policies, and selection processes. The questionnaire contained a large number of items written specifically for this research and included nine questions addressing the recruitment and selection issues. Each question comprised several items.

Human resources managers were asked about the indicators used in estimating their companies' human resources needs. In addition, they were asked about the focus of the current recruitment effort and the recruitment policies.

This was followed by other questions asking the HR managers about the recruitment sources used by their organizations. Finally, the main areas were covered by this section, including the selection processes performed in selecting the right employees.

An Arabic version of the questionnaire was then drafted with the help of two bilingual experts who were fluent in both English and Arabic. Consequently, the questionnaire was first translated into Arabic and then translated back into English to ensure translation equivalence (Soriano and Foxall, 2002).

A total of eight pilot tests were then conducted with HR managers who met the selection criteria. Pre-testing was also carried out with two leading academic members of staff at a leading local university. The purpose of the pre-testing was to refine the questionnaire and to assess the validity and applicability of the measures; corresponding amendments were made to the questionnaire after the pilot tests.

THE FINDINGS

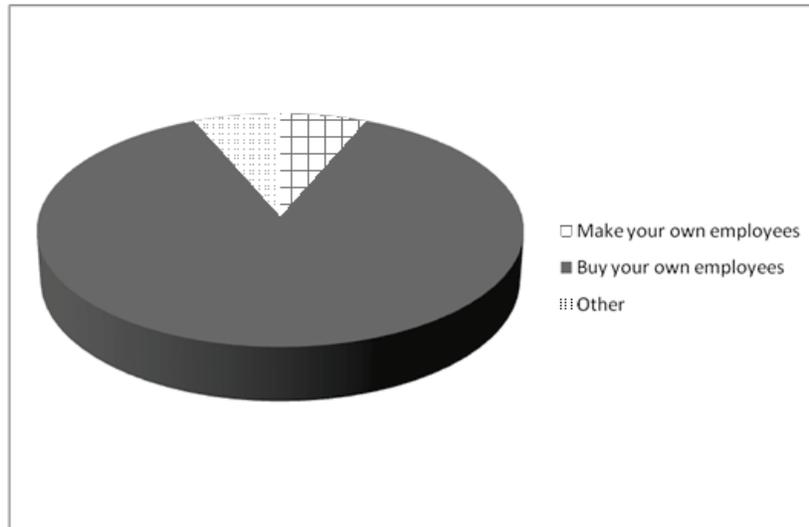
It is generally believed that assessing future human resources needs is one of the most important functions of human resources management. An examination of Table 1 shows that almost half of the HR managers indicated that their companies have developed very detailed plans to show their human resources needs in terms of the number of personnel needed for the coming five years. On the other hand, 12 out of the 31 HR managers pointed out that their plans are approximate in nature and not very detailed. However, perhaps the most striking results are the negative ones. Remarkably, the remainder of the sample admitted that their companies do not have any written plans that document their specific human resources needs. To formulate these plans, HRM departments use a number of indicators, including the current HR inventory, productivity levels, turnover rates, and the absenteeism ratio (Table 2). The importance of these indicators was ranked differently by the respondents. The top two indicators ranked by the participants are productivity level and current HR inventory. Over half of the sample stated that using these two indicators is very important in their organizations while almost half of the participants declared that the absenteeism ratio and turnover rates are important. Yet, one third of the respondents ranked the absenteeism ratio as unimportant to their organization. To sum up, it seems that there is agreement on which indicators are considered very important (i.e., productivity level and current HR inventory); however, responses varied when it came to the important and the unimportant indicators.

Regarding recruitment, for over 87 percent of the organizations included in the survey, recruitment policies encourage 'buying your own employees' through identifying and attracting skilled and experienced employees who need little training (Chart 1). This can be understood in the light of the composition of the workforce in Qatar. Over 90 percent of the workforce are expatriates and temporary workers who are hired on fixed contract bases. Therefore, it is generally believed that the return on investment of training temporary workers is not economically viable.

TABLE 1
THE FREQUENCY OF IMPLEMENTING VARIOUS RECRUITMENT AIDS

Recruitments aids	Percentage of Respondents
Existence of Human Resources needs planning	
Accurate & detailed plans exist	48%
Approximate plans exist	39%
No written plans	13%
Internal recruitment versus external recruitment	
The organization relies heavily on internal recruitment	10%
The organization relies heavily on external recruitment	32%
The organization relies equally on both types	58%

CHART 1
RECRUITMENT POLICIES



Another characteristic of recruitment policies is the emphasis put on locating job applicants (Table 1). Over half of the surveyed organizations rely equally on both internal and external recruitment; one third of the participants stated that their organizations rely heavily on external recruitment; and the remainder recruit mainly internally. However, one of the key features of recruitment practices in Qatar lies in the attitude toward diversity (Chart 2). What might be considered 'discrimination' in terms of recruitment policies in different parts of the world is actually encouraged by the authorities in Qatar. This refers to firms giving higher priority to locals to fill vacancies. It is a national policy called 'Qatarization' and is prioritized by the Council of Ministries. This policy can be noted in participants' responses regarding the focus of their recruitment efforts. Over 60 percent illustrated that currently their organization is targeting native men and women. Foreign specialists and experts from advanced countries come second. Arab expatriates and non-Arab expatriates come third and fourth respectively. The national characteristics are also explicit in terms of the tools usually utilized by job seekers to apply for a vacancy (Chart 3). According to the participants, natives and expatriates value these tools differently. For instance, natives usually apply directly to an organization while the method most used by expatriates is answering a job advertisement, which comes second in importance to national workers. The most significant difference is the use of employment agencies. While almost half of expatriates use private employment agencies, less than 10 percent of natives rely this method. Since there are no labor unions in Qatar, it is not surprising that 30 out of the 31 participants believe that labor unions can hardly be used as a source for recruitment

for both natives and expatriates. The variation between natives and expatriates in utilizing other methods, such as asking a friend or a relative, nepotism, a public employment agency, or a school placement office, were minimal.

CHART 2
FOCUS OF THE CURRENT RECRUITING EFFORTS

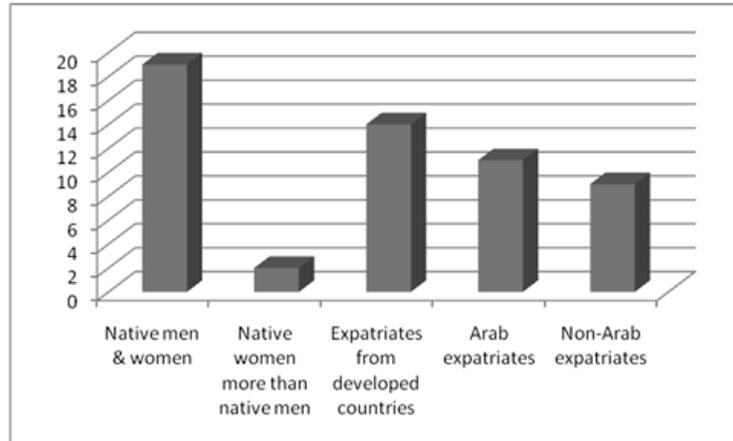
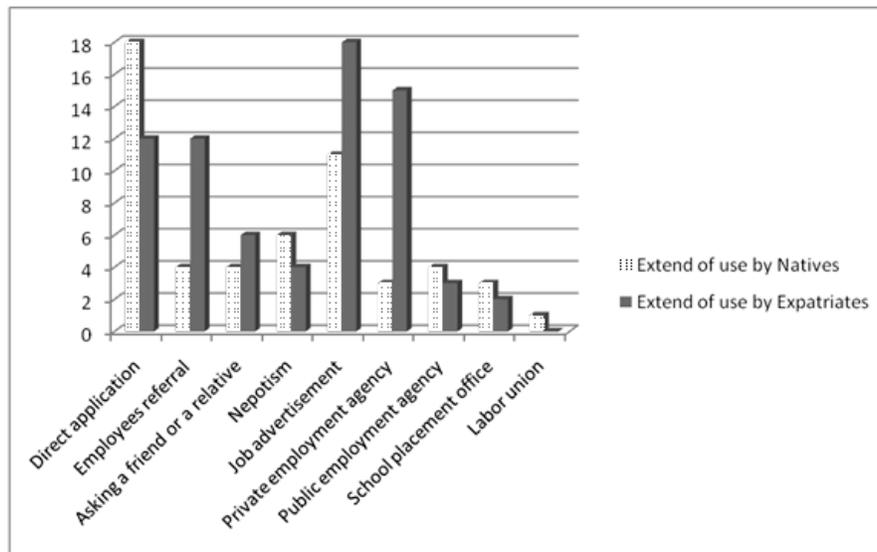


CHART 3
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS HIGHLY RANKING DIFFERENT JOB SEARCHING METHODS



As to the degree of importance of the information provided by the various selection techniques to make the hiring, it was not surprising that the use of employment interviews was voted as most important by 90 percent of the sample. The employment interview is the most common technique worldwide and, according to our sample, this is also the case in Qatar. Application forms, ability tests, and medical examination were all voted second by half of the sample. Reference checking and psychological tests received less emphasis from the respondents, being valued by 42 percent of and 23 percent of the participants respectively (Table 2). Since the interview was the most frequently used technique, it is important to understand what an interview aims to measure (Table 2). Over 87 percent of the participants

placed high emphasis on measuring an interviewee's specific skills. The interviewee's basic attitudes were ranked second by 77 percent of the sample. The interviewee's flexibility and adaptability were also highly emphasized by over 60 percent of the participants. Finally, only 38 percent of the participants believed that employment interviews focus on measuring the interviewee's ambitions.

TABLE 2
THE FREQUENCY AND THE IMPORTANCE PLACED ON VARIOUS RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION TECHNIQUES AND INDICATORS

Indicator / Technique / Focus	Frequency of use / Degree of importance or emphasis		
	High	Medium	low
<i>Indicators to estimate human resource needs</i>			
• Current HR inventory	17	11	3
• Productivity level	18	9	4
• Turnover rates	12	14	5
• Absenteeism ratio	5	16	10
<i>Recruitment and selection tools</i>			
• Application forms	16	11	4
• Medical examination	16	11	4
• Ability tests	16	12	3
• Psychological tests	7	11	13
• Reference checking	13	13	5
• Employment interviews	28	3	-
<i>Employment interview focus</i>			
• The interviewee's basic attitudes	24	5	2
• The interviewee's specific skills	27	4	-
• The interviewee's ambitions	12	15	4
• The interviewee's flexibility and adaptability	19	12	-

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study is to investigate the recruitment and selection practices in Qatar. The research is part of a project in progress investigating the convergence and diversity in national HRM practices. Specifically, the study examines human resources managers' opinions and views on the recruitment and selection practices being used in their companies.

Analysis of the findings shows that almost half of the surveyed companies are involved in formulating detailed recruitment plans. This can be considered as a good indication for giving more attention to having a beneficial and comprehensive recruitment plan. This can be positively reflected on improving the whole recruiting and selection process.

In formulating these plans, companies use various criteria. Productivity level and current human resources inventory came first. They are considered as very important indicators. However, other indicators were ranked either important or unimportant. Giving high attention to the productivity level as an indicator for formulating recruitment plans means that these companies use the most efficient way of assessing their human resources needs.

Furthermore, one important conclusion is the preference of the most of the Qatari companies to use a 'buying your own employees' policy rather than a 'making your own employees' policy. The composition of the workforce in Qatar can justify this result. It is obvious that the general trend in most of the Qatari companies is recruiting skilled and qualified employees. It is believed that this trend can meet the companies' immediate needs under circumstances of the very rapid developmental process.

On the other hand, the results showed that over half of the surveyed organizations rely equally on both internal and external recruitment. So, as a result of that trend, the key feature of recruitment practices in Qatar lies in the attitude towards diversity. However, locals are given priority for filling vacant positions especially in the public sector; this is due to a national policy called 'Qatarization'. Based on that policy, over 60% of the surveyed organizations focus on local men and women.

Regarding the tools used by job seekers, there is sufficient evidence to show that most of locals apply directly to a company. However, expatriates prefer answering job advertisements.

Finally, based on the sample, human resources managers have identified that an employment interview is the most common selection technique presently being used.

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