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The Intercultural Workplace: An Emirati Perspective

Stephen Trinder[1] & Ewa Gajer[1*]

[1] The Higher Colleges of Technology, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

[*] Ewa Gajer, The Higher Colleges of Technology, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The diverse environment of workplaces in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) means that Emirati employees find themselves in daily contact with people from a wide range of different cultures. One prominent outcome of this scenario is that the potential for intercultural misunderstanding and miscommunication between the local population and expat employees increases. This applied research investigation proposes to explore the most common areas of cultural misunderstanding in a higher education institution in the UAE from the perspective of Emirati nationals and to examine the role education plays in raising awareness of cultural issues of both Emiratis and expat employees. In this qualitative research project, 16 working professionals of both genders in varying positions were interviewed. With one exception, they were all either employees or graduates of the same higher education institution. Of the many facets and aspects of culture that were discussed, stereotyping, gender, language and a lack of future preparedness for international work environments were the emergent themes to which more attention needs to be given. Confronting these issues, this study suggests implementing a mandatory intercultural communication component at all levels of education, a needs analysis for new Emirati employees that would focus on culture-specific training needs, an on-site language support for new hires, creating a cross-cultural buddy system and building multicultural teams.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, workforce cohesion, United Arab Emirates, globalisation, intercultural competence

1. Introduction

In a contemporary global context, intercultural communication has emerged as a key skill for professionals. In North America, as well as in some European countries, investment in staff training and development has increased to this end. Generally, the likes of the United States, Canada, France,

Spain and the United Kingdom are considered culturally diverse nations. However, in terms of percentage in comparison with the host population, these countries do not come close to the high level of diversity in the Arabian Gulf States. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a multicultural society in which expatriates constitute close to 90% of the population. While local Emiratis account for just 11%, Bangladeshis (7.4%), Pakistanis (12.6%) and Indians (27.4%) make-up the largest segment of the populace (*Global Media Insight*, 2019). Notwithstanding, the country has a large Filipino, Chinese, Nepalese and Egyptian diaspora, as well as workers from any number of European, African, and American nations. The construction and domestic-work sectors are entirely migrant-dominated (Al-Jenaibi, 2011), but education, finance, and service are highly diverse. This means that Emirati employees of both private and public organizations find themselves in daily contact with people from a wide range of different cultures.

The number of Emirati nationals entering the workforce is rising. This is due to a rapid social and economic development and improved literacy, which according to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2020), increased from 53% in 1975 to over 90% in 2019. Tertiary enrolment numbers are also growing from around 17% in 1975 to almost 40% today. At the same time, more Emirati nationals are finding employment as a result of the government's "Emiratization" policy (Forstenlechner, 2008, Hopkyns, 2014, Goby et al., 2015). Because of the cultural melting pot often found in organizations up and down the country, the potential for intercultural misunderstanding and miscommunication between the local population and expat employees increases. In fact, Al Hashmi says that this "cultural distance" (a term he adopts from Ghemawat (2001)) has the "potential to wreak havoc in the UAE due to the extremes of diversity that organizations there have to deal with" (2013, p. 5).

While Williams (2010), Crocetti (1999), and Morrison and Conaway (2006) have written extensively on cultural etiquette and drawn attention to workplace sensitivities for expats coming to live and work in the UAE, many studies and works of literature neglect to focus on how Emiratis find the experience of working with people of differing cultural backgrounds in an institutional context. This applied research investigation proposes to explore the most common areas of cultural misunderstanding from the perspective of Emirati nationals, examining the role education plays in raising awareness of cultural issues among both Emiratis and expat employees. In this way, this research will provide a fresh contribution to knowledge in the field of Education and Intercultural Communication in the Middle East and highlight critical issues within workplace cohesion in the UAE.

2. Literature Review

The concept of culture has been extensively debated in academic circles for many decades. Hall's *The Silent Language* (1959) is considered to be the discipline's seminal text and the one in which the term "Intercultural Communication" was first used. It was written in the shadow of the expansion of the United States to the role of global superpower, and prompted the author to reflect on what he perceived a profound ethnocentrism at the heart of US diplomacy and government that was affecting the nation's

global image. Hall supposed that this was down to essential misunderstandings between people of different cultures who are "not conscious of the elaborate patterning of behaviour which prescribes our handling of time, our spatial relationships, our attitudes toward work, play, and learning' (ibid.: 15). A lack of recognition of this inevitably leads to delusions of cultural self-superiority and prejudice towards others. In his 1976 book, *Beyond Culture*, Hall introduced the concept of high and low context cultures, based on the value a culture places on implicit and explicit communication, individualism and communal harmony.

Kroeber and Parsons see culture as "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior" (1958, p. 583), whereas Schein and Scheiner describe the phenomenon more as an "accumulated learning of a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness' (2017, p.5). Both these, and many other viewpoints, (Note 1) complement Minkov's view of culture as a social phenomenon (2013, p. 10): not an inherent factor of what makes us human like our instincts or our personality, but a learned behaviour cultivated by influential actors around us like family, religion, media and government. In this way, Lewis (2002) and Welsch (1999) believe that, rather than a static, unchanging entity, culture can be considered fluid or malleable. It is constantly adapting and accommodating to the external environmental and social factors influencing it. As Schabracq similarly observes: "culture is the result of historical, self-organizing development" (2007, p. 2), which points to the idea that it is fundamentally operative and reactive. These assertions follow Hofstede, who wrote in his famous book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, that culture is a group's response to its social environment (1991). (Note 2)

Erez and Gati draw attention to the multi-layered construct of culture from an individual "micro" to global "macro" scale (2004). (Note 3) In an organizational context, this concept highlights how accompany, organization, and/or corporation cannot be said to simply constitute a workplace in a merely physical sense. Instead, these bodies can be considered, as Morgan suggests, more akin to "mini-societies that have their own distinctive patterns of culture and subculture" (2001, p. 129). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner elaborate on this by stating that:

When people set up an organization, they typically borrow from models or ideals that are familiar to them…this is a subjective construct, and employees will give meaning to their environment based on their own cultural programming (2012, p. 193).

This means that when individuals of different cultures and diverse backgrounds work together (Note 4) idiosyncratic modes of thought, customs, and belief systems have an inevitable positive and negative impact on the workplace. They can be positive in that effective negotiation and understanding of the fluid nature of culture as a phenomenon opens up the potential for building strong transnational teams and customer relationships through the cultivation of intercultural competent employees. On the other hand, they can be negative in the way that differences are often difficult to overcome and may cause

untold damage to stakeholder relationships and future business success. As Schein and Scheiner note: [Incoming employees'] beliefs and values will become part of the identity of the group. Whereas those values and beliefs might have been debated at the launching of the group, they become non-negotiable and are treated as "assumptions" that new members are expected to adopt as the price of admission to the group (2017, p. 9).

This highlights how workplace culture can be considered subconsciously a negotiated, or agreed upon, state of affairs, with varying degrees of acceptance and willingness to adapt among "founding" and "newer" members of the group.

In order to confront these factors in a global scenario, intercultural communication skills are critical. Many defintions of the term are similar.Lustig and Koester see it as "symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process, in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" (2007, p. 46). Jacksonrefers to it as an interpersonal exchange between "individuals or groups who are affiliated with different cultural groups and/or have been socialised in different cultural environment" (2014, p. 3). Chaney and Martin define intercultural communication as "generally people who are of the same race, political persuasion, and religion who share the same interests sharing the interests intraculturally" (2007, p. 3). The majority of subject scholars are, on the whole, divded into two different camps: communication and language.For example, Rogers and Steinfattof the communication campprescribe intercultural communications "the exchange of information between individuals who are unalike culturally" (1999, p. 1) whereas Müller-Jacquier relates the discipline to language: "[intercultural communication] is the varied language and discourse strategies people from different cultural backgrounds use in direct, face-to-face situations" (2004, p. 295). In the milieu of the global workplace, linguistic interculturalists have a strong point, specifically when we consider the rise of English as a *lingua franca* in business. This means that mastery of a second language is of crucial importance for workplace success and cohesion, and in many cases a lack of language fluency and a failure to comprehend the nuances of English leads to many problems.

On the other hand, awareness of different communication styles, particularly the importance of non-verbal communication in "high-context cultures" (Hall, 1971), has to be considered a priority. Adapting to new situations, groups, and workplaces in a cultural framework always involves a process of acculturation, which is acclimatizing or adjusting to the new culture and incorporating different ideas and processes (Hazuda & Hoffner, 1988). Ideally, the outcome of this development should result in a form of cultural collaboration. Gupta postulates that diversity is simply good for business: "embracing diversity is a positive motivational tool that can attract and retain the best employees, as well as achieving a better level of competitiveness" (In Washington, 2013, p. 1). Despite this, more often than not, matters of intercultural conflict hinder any potential success. Therefore, it is important to stress that effective intercultural communication and intercultural competence cannot ignore cultural differences. As Bennett says: "Approaches to communication in cross-cultural situations must guard against inappropriate assumptions of similarity and encourage the consideration of difference. For this reason,

intercultural communication is *difference-based*" (2013).

In the UAE, the question of managing and negotiating diversity across workplaces has begun to take a strong precedence in recent years (Warner & Moonesar, 2019). However, this is still a relatively new field of interest in comparison to places like the United States and Europe. While the region has been attracting traders for thousands of years from the Indian Subcontinent and other parts of the Middle East, the discovery of oil in the 1950s and the subsequent development of urban centres through the wealth that this has generated, saw a substantial increase in the demand for foreign labour (Goby et al., 2015). In spite of this, the idea of intercultural competence as a workplace skill was initially largely ignored. Nevertheless, as the local Emirati population in general increased dramatically from the 1980s to the early 2000s, so have the levels and quality of education (Lahmeyer, 2001). This means that today, compared with 30 years ago, through government initiatives and changing attitudes towards gainful employment, the UAE has an eager, growing local workforce population. Interestingly, as Khelifa (2010, p. 19) reports, in its drive towards globalization, the country's education system has moved from an Egyptian curricula to a Western one. "Emirati youth, unlike their parents' generation, now follow Western curricula delivered in English by Western and Western-educated faculty, and are consequently heavily exposed to Western thought, ideals, values, and behaviors". It remains to be seen how this will affect the workplace communication in the long run. In 2014, James and Shammas claimed that "intercultural intelligence education is still in its infancy in the UAE" (p. 62). At national level, the country's government has moved to recognize and acknowledge the UAE's diversity in the sphere of labour law. In 2015, the Anti-discrimination/Anti-hatred law was issued to fight "discrimination against individuals or groups based on religion, caste, race, colour or ethnic origin" (*United Arab Emirates' Government*, 2021). Furthermore, the 2021 National Agenda developed six different priorities to address different sectors of UAE society for future development. One of which, "Cohesive Society and Preserved Identity" aims to promote "an inclusive environment that integrates all segments of society". The designation of 2019 as the "Year of Tolerance", with the intention to promote the UAE as a "global capital for co-existence and cooperation", highlights a further recognition of the nation's cultural diversity within the context of the UAE as a global business hub. Jabeen and Isakovic (2018) draw attention to the important point that the UAE has also adopted Western developmental and management techniques in its quest to shift towards a knowledge economy. As this model is borne within a US-individualist paradigm, the study finds that the participants who were from more collectivist cultures are prone to assume"loyalist' notions of teamwork and a passive approach to decision-making.

Eitzen and Zenn (2011), Held et al. (1999), and Sharifian and Jamarani (2013) debate interconnectedness in the global work environment with a focus on cross-border multinationals. In this milieu, the UAE, like any developed nation, has its fair share of transnational organizations. On the other hand, it is unique in the way that the local population are the minority even in "traditional" small-scale businesses and government ministries. This results in Emiratis having to deal with cultural difference and even the issue of cultural shock in workplace contexts–something that many people

from other nations are unable to comprehend. Cerimagic's (2010) study of the effect of culture on Australian project managers working in the UAE highlights this very issue: documenting clashes between independent and supervisional management styles, direct and indirect communicational differences, and disparities regarding risk avoidance. Grant et al. (2007) discuss the importance of *Tawid* (unity) in the UAE workplace, highlighting a tendency to revert to cultural preference over formal rules and procedures when faced with personal problems and when makingdifficult decisions. Al Mazrouei and Pech (2015) report that non-Emirati workers complained of "different approaches to time management and reluctance to face bad news" as the major obstacles to workplace cooperation (2015, p. 81). A misunderstanding with regard to family commitments and their effect on daily schedules was also conveyed. Again, these studies and others focus on issues of cultural miscommunication from the perspective of non-Emirati employees. Willemyns, Hosie and Lehaney's study (2011), based on 192 questionnaires of Emirati employees in Dubai, investigated communication "ingroups" and "outgroups" as perceived by local employees. It proposed individualistic communication and working towards organizational goals as a way to create a new communication space at a multi-cultural company.However, this in effect moved the discussion away from inter-cultural misunderstanding and conflict per se, unlike this study. Al-Jenaibi's study (2011) discusseddiversity management at a multicultural workplace from the point of view ofboth foreign and Emirati employees as well as their opinions on their company policies.In the subsequent study (2014) Al-Jenaibi looked at how conflict is managed in the UAE organizations, what its effect on productivity is and offered suggestions for conflict resolution. "Gender, culture and knowledge" were grouped together as one area of conflict, the second being personality differences. Al-Jenaibi recommended that there should be more research on the conflict between Emirati and foreign employees (p. 181). In 2015, Goby, Nickerson and David conducted a questionnaire of 458 Emiratis looking at the communication patterns in a diverse work environment. They called for an "organizational communication model centered around indigenous communication preferences" (p. 364). The quantitative study by Steedman et al. (2018) looked at the issue of cultural diversity and inclusion from the point of view of numerous nationalities, Emiratis being only one of the nationality groups surveyed.Likewise,Warner and Moonesar's 2019 study focused on the diversity management of the international workforce in the UAE. In turn, even though the qualitative study by Waxin, Kumra and Zhao (2020) investigated the organizational socialization of Emiratis as "members of a powerful minority", it presented onlythe views of themanagers from 14 organizations.

Where this study offers a new perspective in anthropological research is that not only is the population sample made up of UAE nationals, but that they represent a spectrum of ages and positions, from young administration employees to senior management members.It is also based on interviewswhich gave the respondents a chance to express at length their views on the issue of intercultural challenges they face at their respective workplace. By taking into account this perspective and the contents of this discussion, we propose to answer three central research questions:

1) What are the most common areas of intercultural misunderstanding in UAE workplaces?

2) What are the main cultural factors obstructing Emirati success in a multicultural workplace?

3) How can intercultural communication be improved in UAE workplaces?

By addressing these questions, this investigation will provide evidence of the extent to which intercultural competence is necessary in the UAE, as well as highlight the main areas of concern for Emirati nationals. We aim to clearly identify common areas of inter-cultural conflict and recommend resolutions at both personal and organizational levels.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory and convenience-sampling method with the aim of gathering interview data from Emirati nationals working in the UAE. It sampled 16 working professionals of both genders in varying positions. They were all, with one exception, either employees or graduates of the same higher education institution in the UAE. The objective of the study was to identify prominent areas of intercultural discord as well as investigate the factors that determine Emirati employees' success in a multicultural workplace. The sample consisted of 10 females and six males. Seven respondents were in higher management positions, three were middle managers and six were entry-level employees. The positions included HR managers, procurement specialists, clerks, teachers and strategy directors with educational standards ranging from bachelor's degrees to Ph.Ds. Tenure in their current organisation ranged from one to 20 years, with five being the average. This study used face-to-face, structured interviews, with the participants voluntarily agreeing to take part. We employed the structured method because, as discussed by Bernard (1988), this form of questioning provides the optimal method of information extraction. Furthermore, this research did allow for the provision of previously unconsidered information, enhancing the scope of the investigation's results. Four respondents were contacted twice to clarify an issue that was not included in the original interview, but came to light through questioning.

The interviewees were approached informally and then officially contacted via email to confirm their participation. In addition to an introductory blurb describing the research and its purpose, these emails included the list of questions that were going to be asked, as well as a consent form, which informed the participant of our intention to voice-record the interview for transcription. The consent form also confirmed the confidentiality and anonymity of both the participant and the interview contents and informed them that once the transcription was completed, the voice recordings would be permanently deleted. There were 15 questions, and the interviews were expected to take around 20-25 minutes depending on the depth of individual responses. Broad questions, such as "How many years have you worked at the current company or organisation?" and "How do adjust your communication style to the nationality you are speaking to?", were used as subject prompts. These were followed with more specific questions such as "What in your view do non-Emiratis misunderstand or criticize Emiratis for?" or "Do you think gender issues are a source of conflict?" Respondents were not asked specifically

for their ages in the interview but their years of service can be used as a guide to their level of experience when discussing various cultural viewpoints and opinions on the workplace.

With regard to research limitations, the convenience sampling method used for this project exposes the potential for some research bias, as the sample was largely restricted to one organization due to restrictions caused by the Covid pandemic. To mitigate this, there was an attempt to make sure the sample was representative of the general workplace. The interviewees were of both genders, different ages, institutional rank, socio-economic background and varying degrees of work experience.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Stereotyping and Emiratisation

A large majority of participants (62.5%) felt that they were unjustly stereotyped by their expat colleagues as not hard working upon commencement of their employment. These kinds of issues have been raised by a number of researchers and are believed to have originated in part from the policy of Emiratization. The initiative of the nationalization of the workforce began in the 1950s in the petroleum industry and became a strategy in the 1970s and 1980s. Its aim was to "rehabilitate as many UAE nationals as possible by educating them, training them, and giving them added incentives to participate and become an active part of the work force" (Abu Dhabi Planning Dept., Economic Division, 1976, quoted by Davidson, 2005, p. 151). The problem initially was caused by the fact that "organizations forced to recruit citizens under quota systems lower their standards and employ citizens for positions these particular citizens cannot possibly succeed in, thereby eventually adding to the existing stereotypes' (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2010, p. 366). Moreover, as the two authors point out, the image of an incompetent local employee was propagated even by local journalists, going on to become "almost a part of an identity" (ibid.)

Most of our interviewees thought that they were victims of these old beliefs formed when the country was still evolving. One interviewee said: "The thing I noticed most is that [people think] we don't work hard, [we] get everything easy. This is because of our education system. People think that 99% of us will get a government job so [we] don't put effort into getting a job". Another interviewee felt that other nationalities believed Emiratis not only do not work hard but cannot add value to the workplace. A colleague openly expressed surprise with that person's willingness to work long hours. Another respondent felt that their foreign colleagues were too quick to make unfavourable generalizations about them: "There are many Emiratis now who are trying to improve their knowledge and experience. People should not make such generalizations just because they met Emiratis [in the past] who were like that."Another interviewee said that Emiratis are "framed" in a certain way in the workplace – in particular their lack of commitment to working hours and meeting deadlines.

One senior employee in management brought up an interesting point directly related to cultural differences. It was pointed out that Emiratis are not very good at "selling themselves" and showing their expertise. According to this interviewee, Emiratis are taught to be humble as it is not culturally

acceptable to brag about one's achievements. This leads to many of them being unappreciated or even overlooked, but if asked, "they will step forward".

Another set of stereotypes, both positive and negative, is created by people coming to the UAE with the old notion of Emiratis being "noble savages" or rather "noble Bedouins". As Hawker (2002) pointed out, this is a complex image. On the one hand, it represents nostalgia for the past, and on the other hand, it creates an image of Emiratis as "violent and unpredictable people without an impressive material culture and therefore without civilization". One of our interviewees complained about the lack of knowledge of many foreigners about his country: "Imagine when these people come to us with these stereotypes about Arabia and magic carpets, belly dancing and tents…"

Historically, Emiratis enjoy group interaction and seek each other's company. Our interviewees felt that this is often misunderstood by their expat colleagues. One of the female managers said: "The perception is that we enjoy social gathering and chatting more than meeting deadlines". She also stressed the fact that what is helping to change the negative stereotype of Emiratis is the KPI operational model, which helps them to prove themselves. "The UAE is sharing the best practice of achievements which are tangible and countable".

Emiratization quotas inevitably lead to a number of expat employees being replaced by Emiratis. This, in effect, creates a strong bias against local employees or even what Rees, Mamman and Bin Braik call "sabotage tactics" (2007, p. 47). 44% of our respondents said Emiratization is a divisive workplace issue. Some reported that non-Emirati employees' unease concerning job security manifested itself in a reluctance to pass on information or assist Emiratis in the workplace. One participant said: "Sometimes I feel they are doing things behind my back. He will tell me "I will do it like that", and then he goes and does it differently. I feel there is a lack of honesty and trust'. Another interviewee working in HR commented: "Most non-Emiratis, when they deal with us, they think Emiratis will take their jobs, so they do not, for example, share their knowledge and experience with us". Another participant said: "They were afraid to share technical information because they believed that I would take their position." The same person believed that creating a rapport with others is the only way forward.

There was one quite unorthodox point of view expressed by a senior employee in the education sector who believed that Emiratis should be able to be good enough to compete for any position against anybody: "We need to tell our youth that the only way to get a job is by proving yourself". Conversely, another respondent was quite resentful that Emiratis were perceived as "spoilt": "The way they look at us, I really hate it. In the end, I am working like you. This is my country. What do you expect? That the government will give non-Emiratis more benefits than us? We are the locals, the citizens of this country, so you should expect that". The person also added: "The teaching [and] the education changed. The mentality has changed. A lot of culture has changed. So Emiratis are not the same. You cannot stereotype [us] forever". Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner point out that "negative stereotypes may become self-fulfilling and may act as disincentives that impair willingness to work hard". They also stress their "destructive behavioural consequences" (2010, p. 368).

It is clear from our interviews that stereotyping is an old problem, but it is still one of the major stumbling blocks in building successful inter-cultural relations. It seems to have permeated the workplace environment in the UAE. In its mild form, it causes bewilderment and annoyance, but it can also make the place dysfunctional by provoking feelings of injustice and resentment.

4.2 Gender Issues

The subject of gender as a problematic issue was one of the most prominent views expressed. 60% of interviewees indicated that gender is a cause of friction in the workplace. The majority of those were younger female employees, and only one male interviewee acknowledged his female colleagues' concerns. In general, it appears that most male interviewees and Emirati women in senior positions underestimate the problems younger Emirati women have in a multi-cultural and mixed-gender work environment. They come from gender segregated educational institutions and, as Crabtree (2007, p. 586) pointed out, "are expected to conform to traditional and gendered patterns of behaviour regardless of their education and the social need for their skills in the marketplace". Williams, Wallace and Williams (2013) observe that Emirati women's choice of employment and career pathare still strongly dependent on their male family members' approval. One of our interviewees caveated for example: "My husband is fine with me working in a multi-cultural workplace". This also appears as a finding of Steedman et al. (2018): "53% of women quoted cultural background as the biggest challenge to them following the career of their choice" (p. 10).

The rules of modesty still tend to determine how female Emirati employees deal with their male counterparts. Most women are self-conscious about "boundaries" and find it awkward to informally engage with men and talk about topics which are not work related. Ahmad (2014, p. 191) notes: "Emirati women are more open to other nationalities and are more comfortable having conversations with them, but they are shy towards Emirati men. This is especially obvious at the workplace where the women can comfortably chat with their male colleagues from other nationalities, but they will stop talking as soon as an Emirati male appears on the scene". This theme was touched upon by a number of interviewees who seemed to believe that women prosper professionally when they deal with people (mostly males) of a different cultural background. For example "It's actually a bit brave, but for Emirati ladies, it's easier to deal with foreign men than Emirati men. It's better for them to be in a multicultural environment where they will be more free to talk to a foreigner, to do their work, to do mistakes. Not with Emirati men, this is something bad in our culture. For example, if they go to the market and the salesperson is not Emirati they will be more open, they will talk. But if an Emirati guy comes into the shop maybe they will stop, or they will cover up, or be more conservative about what they do".

In spite of this positive attitude to a multicultural workplace, the gender divide was mentioned as a possible source of intercultural conflict and misunderstanding by a number of interviewees. Foreign employees may perceive the need for privacy of Emirati women as unfriendly. Emirati women tend to cluster at lunchtime or avoid public spaces altogether. They expect their male colleagues to knock when they enter the room and find open seating arrangements difficult, always opting for the company of

another woman. At meetings, they will always sit next to another female employee and are reluctant to speak in public. As Ahmad points out: "Women are shy in group communication and they may either be silent or find a female colleague to chat with" (2014, p. 189). One of our female respondents saw this is a major problem in her dealings with expat colleagues: "Many foreigners find it hard to understand that I spend most of my time with other women and find it a bit hard to freely mix with men. They do not understand that this is not about them but about our culture." She also referred to different norms applying to women in her culture: "It would be odd if I were seen as spending a lot of time with a guy or guys. People in my culture will immediately think we have a relationship. They will not judge the guy, but they will judge me". Foreign employees, especially those from individualistic and low-context cultures, are not always aware that a woman's behaviour affects not only her reputation but her family's as well.

A male interviewee presented an interesting point of view. He stated that female employees sometime take advantage of their gender to exclude themselves from certain tasks: "They might misuse that privilege by pretending that this is a cultural issue, for example, "I cannot stay after a certain time because I have family issues, I cannot do this work because it's not proper for an Emirati lady". Some of them take advantage of this". While an Emirati employee might be able to culturally navigate such a statement, this could undoubtedly cause confusion and even tension in relations with a non-Emirati colleague. However, this was an isolated statement, and as such cannot be used for any convincing conclusion.

4.3 Language and Communication Issues

Carroll, Al Kahwaji and Litz (2017, p. 317) point out that: "In response to globalisation, the United Arab Emirates has invested tremendous resources into their budding education system. Such investment has resulted in the increased use of a bilingual curriculum where Arabic and English are held in high regard." English is the lingua franca of the huge expatriate community and of most UAE organizations and businesses. Willemyns, Hosie, and Lehaney (2011, p. 252f.) postulate that "most Emirati Nationals, particularly those working in large organizations, are competent English speakers, so language difficulties were not an issue". However, this research found that some 25% of respondents expressed anxiety with regard to their language capabilities in a work context. They felt that their English skills were not at the required level for effective communication in the workplace. For instance, one respondent in the education sector said: "Language was a huge barrier for me. I do not mean only vocabulary. The concepts were very different too. Expressions that people use are linked to their culture". Another mentioned language and communication in general as a workplace issue in the UAE:"I have witnessed many [incidents of miscommunication]. People misunderstand their colleagues because the language is not clear to them-and then the other person will get irritated or offended". English education was highlighted by one participant as a possible reason for this: "I was not prepared for the global workplace. Starting from the English I received, it focused on grammar rather than conversation." Two respondents complained of problems caused by other nationalities" poor command

of English or their accent, and two more mentioned their own pronunciation problems, which led to a misunderstanding or cultural tension. One had trouble understanding different English accents. Goby, Nickerson and David (2015, p. 370) postulate that inadequate language skills are at the root of complaints about workmates at all levels of employment.

In situations such as this, an obvious solution would be to ask for clarification, as one of our interviewees suggested. This, however, leads to another cultural issue affecting communication, which is the often-cited idea of "losing face". We did not ask a specific question about "saving face" in our interviews as this is one of the major cultural characteristics not only of the UAE but of the Middle Eastern cultures in general and has been widely covered in research (Kemp, 2009, Willemyns, Hosie, & Lehane, 2011; Heath, Vogel, & Al-Darmaki, 2016). In view of the feedback we received regarding stereotyping, the reluctance of Emiratis to admit language difficulties to their expat colleagues is not that surprising and may be perceived as "losing face". What is needed is a pre-emptive communication/language strategy. This is elaborated on in our recommendations.

The United Arab Emirates is a collectivistic society. "This is manifested in a close long-term commitment to the member "group", be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships" (Hofstede Insights, 2020). Emiratis have a strong tribal heritage and rich oral tradition. They enjoy spending time with each other. This is often misunderstood by their expat colleagues. As one interviewee explained: "Here, we would never ask a person [entering the office]: "How can I help you?" We would say: "Good morning, how is your day?" Then we would chat for a while. Then we would say: "So tell me what brought you to my office. What can I do for you?" Foreigners are too direct for us." In turn, the indirect communication pattern of Emirati employees may be regarded as a lack of focus or even laziness, leading once again to stereotypes and tension.

There was another interesting communication issue brought up by an Emirati manager, and we decided to investigate it further by contacting four of our interviewees again (two other managers and two employees) to seek their view on the matter. The issue brought to our attention was that of a performance appraisal, or more specifically the manner in which it was done. As mentioned earlier, KPI operational model was very successful in changing the negative stereotypes about Emiratis and helped them demonstrate achievements that were "tangible and countable". At the same time, however, it was very culturally challenging to implement the western performance appraisal model and deliver negative feedback. Willemyns, Hosey, and Lehaney (2011, p. 254) noted that "handled poorly, negative feedback (especially in public) is not soon forgotten by co-workers, and can be a major source of face threat, leading to a heightened sense of distance from the co-worker". The issue mentioned by the manager was that of the negative feedback given in writing as well as delivering positive and negative comments together."When we see things in writing for the first time, it is upsetting. We are an oral culture. … I learnt from the western culture that I need to document things. Then I would have other Emiratis come to me worried that I wrote things down rather than discuss them. … Also, the sandwich approach to appraisal will never work here. The praise and criticism cannot go together". All of the

interviewees contacted expressed the same view. Three were of the opinion that negative feedback should not be recorded at all until the employee was given a chance to improve their performance. One suggested the negative feedback discussion should be recorded only between the line-manager and the employee, for example in an email. The dominant view was: “In our culture, most people do not accept negative things in writing. They will get upset and think this is personal”. We believe this issue warrants further research as it can clearly lead to inter-cultural misunderstanding or even conflict within a team.

Informal communication as such, and especially inter-gender communication, is problematic at workplace since, as stated earlier: “Both genders feel that inter-gender communication at work in permissible if it related to work, but purely social interaction between genders especially outside of the workplace, is against the local customs and the religion of Islam (Ahmad, 2014, p. 189). Willemyns, Hosie, and Lehaney (2011, p. 252) found that in their study: “There were relatively few direct references to cross-cultural issues in the participants” descriptions of the conversations. This may be due to the largely westernized nature of many organizations in the UAE, where even Emiratis have adopted western norms, values and communication styles’. In our study, however, the interviewees pointed out a number of areas they perceived as culturally awkward with family (50%) and religion (40%) coming out on top.

With regards to family, one interviewee said: “I worry about cultural differences [in conversation]. Foreigners openly talk about their families and marriages, but for us locals, this is not so”. Asking about specific people within the family was also mentioned as a taboo, especially if that person was a woman. “Some of us would be embarrassed to ask: “What’s your mother’s name?” or “What is your wife’s name?” The reply would be: “Why are you asking about my mother?”’A female respondent said: “My personal life is my own”. Another female interviewee mentioned that the topic of intermarriage was an issue that foreigners were interested in discussing, while it made Emiratis feel judged or even attacked. The issue should be given more attention during cultural orientation for expat employees at the beginning of their employment. It has clearly been overlooked as an area of potential intercultural friction.

Expat employees are always advised to avoid the topic of religion or approach it with great sensitivity. It was surprising then that so many respondents felt intimidated by intimate questions related to the nature and practices of Islam which were coming from expats. However, it was the manner and tone of the conversation rather than the topic of the religion itself which worried our Emirati interviewees. For instance, one male administration professional stated: “We are embarrassed when someone says: “Why do you pray 5 times a day? Do you think you are closer to God than us?” Another participant stated: “Such sensitive topics [like religion] should not be approached in a sarcastic way. Once or twice I [have taken people] aside…and explained things to them”. It would be interesting to investigate if this is related to the language registers rather than intended irony or disrespect. In our opinion, this would warrant further research especially that religion is the foundation of the Emirati society.

Other sensitive and awkward conversations topics mentioned by our respondents included nature of relationships (25%), different sense of humour of other cultures i.e., jokes (18.75%) and body language (18.75%). It cannot be assumed then that attending orientation sessions by expats is enough to bridge the culture gap. Conversation topics can cause damage to inter-cultural relations. One female interviewee said: "Religious or cultural stuff brought up in public would make me worried…. I do not want to be perceived as [an] aggressive person, so I would not react. I would probably smile. At the end of the day, I would feel that I did not defend my culture".

4.4 Future Preparedness for the Global Workforce

There can be no doubt that global workplace requires employees with cultural sensitivity and good intercultural communication skills. According to Al Hashmi, 70% of employers recruiting graduates from the Middlesex University in Dubai look for those with strong intercultural communication skills (2013: 8). A study conducted by the British Council in 2013 found that more than half of UAE employers are looking for candidates with strong intercultural skills and value a candidate's "ability to work with a diverse set of colleagues" (p. 16). The issue has been taken up by many local newspapers, such as *The National* and *Gulf News*. Swan (2013) pointed out that employers in the UAE prefer candidates who have studied abroad due to their "independent attitude" and "maturity". Kader (2019) quoted the manager of "Career Services and Cooperative Education" at RIT University in Dubai, who pointed out that soft skills are as important as theoretical knowledge.

Despite the cultural diversity of the UAE, an overwhelming majority of interviewees (85%) felt that primary and secondary institutions in particular are not doing enough to prepare students for the global workplace. They mainly pointed out the lack of diversity among teachers. Moreover, they felt that their teachers did not have a global outlook and lacked intercultural knowledge. One respondent stated: "[In my government school] teachers were not qualified in my opinion. We were taught in a very traditional way". Another interviewee said: "We need more awareness about dealing with people of other cultures in schools". This was echoed by a similar comment: "[Students] need more awareness. They do not have enough. It should start early. Some students study in government schools, so they do not meet foreigners."In view of the number of the respondents who expressed this concern, it is clear that intercultural awareness is a soft skill Emiratis feel they lack. It is therefore an issue which needs to be addressed by a company aiming at intercultural harmony.

Not surprisingly then, with regard to the advice to young Emiratis entering the global workforce, 55% of interviewees encouraged future workers to bridge the cultural gap themselves through self-education on the cultural habits and etiquette of non-Emiratis, even other Arabs. "When you understand another culture they will accept you and share their experience with you. They will feel [more] confident". Another respondent said it was important to overcome the fear of working with foreigners as "they are people like us and [we can] benefit from their experience and knowledge".

Many respondents also stressed the value of open-mindedness (33%) and cultivating an attitude of hard work (25%). For instance, one education professional said: "[Young Emiratis] need to understand that it

is fun and exciting to work in a multi-cultural work environment. It is more interesting than being homogenous. People have different personalities, but working with people from other countries is like having a global world in a small format. It comes with pros and cons. They will enjoy the positives, and they will struggle with the negatives, but that's part of life". A female respondent said that companies should do more to close the culture gap: "I think it would be fun to have PD, fun workshops introducing people to each other's culture, what to avoid, how not to upset people, to break the ice". Working in a multi-cultural team can clearly lead to greater tolerance and better communication. What is important from the point of view of a company is that a well-working multicultural team can share a greater pool of knowledge, which in turn leads to enhanced and improved collective creativity (Tadmor et al., 2012).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This investigation proposed to identify common areas of cultural misunderstanding from the viewpoint of Emirati nationals. Once again, the three central research questions in this project were:

1) What are the most common areas of intercultural misunderstanding in UAE workplaces?

2) What are the main cultural factors obstructing Emirati success in a multicultural workplace?

3) How can intercultural communication be improved in the UAE?

Of the many facets and aspects of culture that were discussed, stereotyping, gender, language and a lack of future preparedness for international work environments were the emergent themes to which more attention needs to be given. Taking into account the project findings, the researchers would like to put forward some suggestions about how to improve intercultural competence at the workplace and work towards addressing the issues that have arisen.

Firstly, a useful foundation on which to build an interculturally competent workforce would be to establish a needs analysis for new Emirati employees that focuses on culture-specific training needs. Through this, potentially problematic communication and work-related issues such as intercultural conflict resolution training can be identified and addressed early on. Budget permitting, the implementation of confidential, on-site cultural counselling may also be beneficial both to Emirati and non-Emirati employees. This has been done in the United States higher education sector quite effectively and has been discussed by Pedersen (2002) as the means of building cultural awareness. One of the main recurring themes arising from the respondents' comments on stereotyping and miscommunication was that of cultural unfamiliarity or even ignorance. A multicultural counsellor could help address such issues before they escalate to conflict and/or stress and resentment-something cited as a key reason for the exacerbation of stereotyping in core intercultural literature.

The next stage of building successful multicultural teams would be the implementation of a cross-cultural buddy system in which incoming Emirati employees are paired with a buddy from a different cultural background (and vice versa) for the initial probationary period. Regular personal encounters with an individual from another culture would initiate a process of familiarizing a person

with different communication styles, attitudes to task completion, disclosure and knowledge—elements that have been discussed by Hall as central to increasing intercultural competence. Staff development programs tend to focus on general team building (Waxin, Kumra, & Zhao, 2020), and mentoring (Steedman et al., 2018, p. 8). We postulate that building multicultural and multilingual awareness is the key to reducing conflict as well as misunderstandings regarding Emiratization, gender and stereotyping. Jones (2007, p. 48) claims that these kinds of institutional problems often develop from the idea that "international standards" need to be met, something that in itself clearly ignores culturally specific beliefs and values. Therefore, creating a "tailored", organization specific and multicultural team building program should be the core tenet of any organization. The ultimate aim of such undertaking should be to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding, patience and conviviality in the workplace.

In response to the high percentage of respondents who expressed concern that preparation for the global workplace is inadequate at educational institutions, we propose action at a national level in the form of implementing a mandatory intercultural communication education component at all levels of education. Government schools would particularly benefit from cultural exchange programs, whether physical or virtual. As the findings of this paper show, 25% of respondents expressed anxiety with their language capabilities and felt that their English skills were not at the required level for effective communication in the workplace. Comments from interviewees and anecdotal evidence highlight a dissatisfaction with passive language learning at school, resulting in their inability to engage in proper business communication, such as effective meeting participation or writing email communique. While overcoming this problem is a challenge for the UAE education system, a more immediate solution in an organizational milieu might take the form of on-site language support for new hires and "extraprofessional" English classes. Here again, the buddy system and intercultural teams would prove extremely useful. A central component of intercultural education is to prevent conflict at source rather than when it occurs. A culturally educated and trained workforce would be more satisfied and thus more productive. It would undoubtedly contribute to the success of the company as a whole.

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Notes

Note 1. See Segall (1984), Canclini (1995), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1999), and Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010).

Note 2. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner seem to agree with this: 'culture is the context in which things happen' (2012, p. 10).

Note 3. See Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner on national, corporate and professional culture (2012, p. 9).

Note 4. Chan describes workplace diversity as the co-existence of staff from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds in a particular organization' (2011, p. 1).