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THE SCOPE AND IMPACT OF WORKPLACE DIVERSITY IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES – AN INITIAL STUDY

Abstract: Managing workplace diversity has become a priority concern among organizations in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today. The UAE has one of the world's largest net migration rates, and the number of workers from India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, the USA, among other countries, has increased significantly in recent decades.* The UAE's cross-border mobility has resulted in the interaction of people with diverse language, customs and ethnic backgrounds. Although diversity has been shown to have a number of benefits, including enhanced employee creativity and competence, this recognition is often found more in theory than actual practice. Diversity can also lead to miscommunication, dysfunctional adaptation behaviors and the creation of barriers that reduce the benefits diversity can bring to the organization. Due to the nature of the UAE workplace, which is dominated by a foreign workforce, this study critically analyzes the benefits and challenges organizations face in the diverse workplaces of the United Arab Emirates. The study used a multi-method approach combining survey data from 450 surveys of foreign workers with qualitative data from interviews with native officials of organizations. It is an attempt to compare the views of UAE workplace experience from two different groups – non-native workers and native officials. The research found a generally favorable view toward workplace diversity from the perspective of surveyed employees. However, when asked more detailed questions about company policy, a significant segment of respondents expressed reservations about their employer's ability to implement successful intercultural communication and diversity practices.

Key words: diversity, cross-cultural communication, multiculturalism, immigration, human resources, teamwork, South Asia, United Arab Emirates

*B. Burns, "Life in Abu Dhabi in the UAE," retrieved February 23, 2011 from http://www.escapeartist.com/efam/69/Living_In_The_UAE.html

Journal for Communication and Culture 1, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 49-81
© Institute for Communication and Culture
E-ISSN & ISSN-L: 2247-4404
www.jcc.icc.org.ro • contact@icc.org.ro

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication has become a necessity in most workplaces due to the forces of globalization. There may be no other region where this necessity is more clearly evident than in the Arabian Gulf, and more specifically, the United Arab Emirates. Elmaddsia¹ argues that executives are the most exposed to the international mobility of labor as a result of globalization. This is especially evident in the UAE where an excessively large ratio of the workforce is foreign. "The needs of these executives are changing and increasingly focus on the nature of sought skills in an environment where understanding of international standards and issues is a competitive advantage"². In the United Arab Emirates, or UAE (total pop. approx. 8.2 m), which consists of seven different emirates, expatriates account for 90% of its population, including residents from South Asia, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Iran, northern Africa, and Western countries. The UAE's ethnic diversity is a result of having one of the world's highest net migration rates which may be attributed to several factors, among them changes in economic and political systems and the differential acknowledgment of human rights by countries across the world.³

In the UAE, migrants are concentrated in two main sectors: construction and domestic work⁴, although many work in other service industries. A small minority of expatriates are in the professional fields such as education and technology. The majority of people employed in the construction and service sectors are immigrants from countries like Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Philippines.⁵ At the end of 2006, the number of immigrants working for private organizations in the Dubai emirate accounted for 98% of its total private-sector workforce.⁶ The unusual workplace ratio of foreign to native workers has caused tensions, both from the native population's unemployment issues and problems experienced by the foreign workforce as a result of less-than-optimal working conditions in some situations. Regardless of social, economic and political concerns, the pace of hiring foreign workers has not slowed; in fact, due to ongoing development in the UAE, the rate of hiring foreign workers has actually increased.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are under increased pressure to appropriately employ and manage people of diverse cultural and racial backgrounds.⁷ Thus, the skillful management of diversity in the workplace through various means⁸ has emerged as a new priority in the UAE. This results in an increasing need for managers in UAE organizations to understand and implement the best communication and diversity strategies when working with a highly diverse workforce. As might be expected, however, like many organizations, companies in the

UAE have, at best, inconsistent policies and methods regarding diversity and intercultural communication.

The term "workplace diversity" can be defined as "the co-existence of staff from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds in a particular organization"⁹. Diversity is valued in organizations for a variety of reasons. Researchers have identified diversity as an important element in sustaining equality of access and opportunity in the workplace. The support for equal opportunity helps institutions gain the most benefit from an increasingly multicultural labor force.¹⁰ In this way initiatives supporting diversity are aimed at ensuring that a given organization does not lose or waste talent.

Given the nature of the UAE labor force, this research study aims to investigate whether or not intercultural communications and diversity strategies have evolved in the UAE workplace to current standards believed to be required for success, or whether the strategies used to manage its diverse workforce remain assimilative and relatively ineffectual to meet current and future needs and objectives in UAE organizations. The workplace executives and officials interviewed held a more ambivalent view toward the general subject, raising both economic and nationalistic questions about the role of workplace diversity. It was also clear that these same executives and officials emphasize a process of employee assimilation to the dominant organizational culture through language acquisition and workplace training rather than a more pluralistic approach that would transcend nationality and find common ground based on values, attitudes, and communication practices related to education, profession, gender, age, and other aspects of culture.¹¹ Because of the density of foreign workers in the UAE workplace, it could become a "hotspot" of investigative research regarding the needs of employees for more effective intercultural communication, diversity wisdom, and the impact that cultural identity has on the work environment. This article is an attempt to highlight the current situation in the UAE and the need for future research in this region and subject matter.

2. Literature review

Changes that have taken place in the global market in recent years have altered the way people perceive organizations and interact within them. Globalization has presented curious juxtapositions: for example, an Indian employee could work in the Emirates for an American company and interact with a Kenyan colleague.¹² An "organization" does not merely represent a workplace; rather, organizations can be considered "mini-societies that have their own distinctive patterns of culture and subculture"¹³. Organizations consist of employees who work, interact, and share each other's life for a specific time.¹⁴ Today in these "societies,"

employees are increasingly not only required to get work done, but to know how to communicate across languages and cultures.¹⁵ Scholars studying organizations have consequently turned their attention more closely toward definitions and application of the concepts of culture and diversity, and with them, a "cultural approach to organization communication"¹⁶.

Culture can be understood in various ways. In one sense, it is the product of many years of continuous history and civilization of a people – essentially what has grown from the minds and creativity of a group of people that share a common heritage.¹⁷ Culture has also been described as the schemes of facts shared by a relatively large group of people. LeBaron emphasizes that culture relates to manners, principles, values, and characters that a group accepts generally without thinking about them and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.¹⁸ The concept of diversity is closely related to that of culture. The term diversity is used broadly to refer to many demographic variables, including, but not limited to, race, religion, color, gender, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, age, education, geographic origin, and skill characteristics¹⁹. Workforce diversity refers to similarities and differences among employees in terms of these same variables.

Cultural identity can be understood as the growing deposit of knowledge, practice, beliefs, values, attitudes, senses, hierarchies, religion, concepts of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the creation, and material objects and property obtained by a group of people in the course of generations. Cultural differences can arise among individuals over time from various influences. According to Varadaraja, these influences fall into two categories: (a) influences that act in the early stages of one's formation; and (b) influences that arise later in life as a result of education, reading, travel, and the like.²⁰ Culture works through symbols, heroes, rituals, and deeply held values.²¹ In terms of communication, Elaine stresses (perhaps in part just for effect) that *culture is communication; communication is culture*.²²

With globalization comes the inevitability of diversity in the workplace. "But diversity does not represent only advantages: it can also cause serious communication problems, intercultural conflict²³ and impede the smooth flow of business"²⁴. Consequently, diversity is one of the contemporary challenges that face organizations. The more diverse environments often arising in wake of globalization could certainly encourage new ideas and creative approaches to problem solving, but they also introduce important challenges.²⁵ Daily interactions between individuals of different backgrounds and cultures could, if not dealt with appropriately, spark conflicts. Since, as mentioned above, cultural

understandings are often opaque to their bearers, potential culturally-based inefficiencies and conflict can present themselves like icebergs. Acknowledging and understanding culture as means of forming improved channels of communication can help employees make more productive and adaptive choices within organizations. Culture can be used, not as a mean to emphasize differences, but rather point at similarities.²⁶

Knowing about organizational communication is only the first step in effective communication within an organization. An individual must also learn variations in communication that can occur, interpret communication differences in productive ways, and make effective choices about how to communicate across the numerous organizational boundaries that exist within a business community.²⁷

Keeping in mind LeBaron's warning that there is no comprehensive way to understand culture and its relations to communication and conflict, there are tools often used by anthropologists and communication scholars for helping to categorize cultural differences applicable to diverse organizations.. One familiar tool deals with the concepts of high-context and low-context communication. ²⁸ High-context and low-context communication refers to the level to which speakers trust factors other than explicit speech to convey their messages. Hall ²⁹ suggests that communication varies according to its degree of field dependence, and that it can be classified into two general categories -- high-context and low-context. "Field dependence refers to the degree to which things outside the communication itself affect the meaning. Low- and high-context communication refers not only to individual communication strategies, but may be used to understand cultural groups"³⁰. Generally, Western cultures tend to gravitate toward low-context starting points, while Eastern and Southern cultures tend to use high-context communication. Again, these are merely rubrics that "give windows into how different groups of people make sense of their worlds. They are neither a reliable guide to every member of a particular group nor are they fixed in nature, since culture is constantly evolving and changing as people within groups and the contexts around them change"³¹.

Likewise, employees in diverse workplaces are often challenged to adapt their own cultural bias³² and moral measurements to be tolerant of differences. Within a given culture, values can maintain order and sustain a society. However, sometimes the explanatory function of such values, which once served a purpose, might need to be drastically modified as a result of increasing knowledge or practical requirements. This dimension often requires going beyond understandings of national, racial, and religious boundaries.³³

Elmaddsia refers to a study conducted by Cox which describes four methods of acculturation behaviors for employees in a firm with a diverse workforce: assimilation, separation, deculturation and pluralism. The first, assimilation, is a one-way process of adaptation where employees adapt to the culture of the company, and all other cultures are absorbed and then eliminated, with the minority cultures meeting the needs of the dominant culture. "This adaptation of unilateral minority implies a kind of cultural mutilation, as is the case for minorities to move forward, must adopt certain values of the company"³⁴. Separation is another method which limits the exchanges between diverse groups and promotes partitioning from a spatial, cultural and technical perspective.³⁵ The third method is deculturation where there is no preferred culture that has dominance over others. Such an environment could be a result of a hiring policy that diminishes cultural differences and emphasizes grouping of like people together to reduce misunderstandings. Finally, pluralism is a method where cultural symbiosis is a result of perceptions that each minority culture makes positive contributions. The environment would contain the democratic ideals of equality where differences can be expressed, and where an appreciation of different cultures exists. According to Cox, pluralism is the key to success for multinational corporations.³⁶

Unfortunately, host organizations often adhere to the assimilation model, which simply suggests that in order to succeed, foreign workers need to display the ability and willingness to adapt. This attitude would diminish the need, from a management perspective, to learn about the cultural issues of foreign people in their workplace. However, according to Wentling and Palma-Rivas³⁷, a desire and interest in diverse cultures can help employees understand the wants and customs of coworkers from cultures that differ from their own, while not compromising the objectives of an organization. In fact, some research shows that cultural diversity not only does not compromise an organization, it actually promotes its general objectives because diversity enhances the ability to communicate with a diverse customer base and public. Although such diverse requirements have often been attached to the needs of the public in the United States³⁸, most countries today have a growingly diverse customer base.

The attention being given by employers to issues of workplace diversity, for example, through the creation of diversity mission statements and the development of systematic diversity plans, is well established.³⁹ Employers can leverage diversity to create culturally-specific rules that can improve relations between employees.

Some scholarship regarding diversity and its relationship to cultural identity has tried to move beyond just thinking of cultural

identity in terms of nationality. Jameson argues “A broad conception of cultural identity should not privilege nationality but instead should balance components related to vocation, class, geography, philosophy, language, and the social aspects of biology”⁴⁰. Cultural identity, states Jameson, is “intertwined with power and privilege, affected by close relationships, and negotiated through communication”⁴¹. A more complete definition of culture, then, according to Jameson would be “the coherent, learned, shared view of a group of people about life’s concerns that ranks what is important, furnishes attitudes about what things are appropriate, and dictates behavior”⁴². This broader conception of culture will facilitate intercultural business communication more effectively, and allow managers and others to find common ground based on values, attitudes, and communication related to education, profession, gender, age, and “other components of culture that transcend nationality”⁴³.

Because of the unique nature of the UAE work environment and the density of foreign workers in the labor pool, the UAE organizations would do well to undertake an examination of the effectiveness of their intercultural communication and diversity strategies. Most scholars agree that in order to be most effective, much attention needs to be given to the ways that people from diverse groups are able to communicate and interact in the workplace. Consequently, this study is an attempt to analyze the problems and benefits faced by organizations across the United Arab Emirates who are seeking to adjust to an immigrant and multicultural workforce.

The study examines the following research questions:

- How effective is diversity management and communication in the UAE?
- What impact do diversity challenges have on advancement and treatment of foreign employees?
- Do foreign workers and native officials have contrasting or similar responses in their value and assessment of workplace diversity practices in their organizations?

3. Research Methods and Methodology

The study used a multi-method approach that combined qualitative and quantitative methods to produce a complimentary set of data regarding practices involving a number of variables.⁴⁴ Using both quantitative and qualitative methods is becoming more common and desirable, according to Mateev.

Quantitative and qualitative observations provide intercultural researchers with different ways of operationalizing and measuring theoretical constructs and practical concepts. While quantitative methods

can provide a high level of measurement precision and statistical power, qualitative methods can supply a greater depth of information about the nature of communication processes in a particular research setting”⁴⁵.

Assumpta and Sandin⁴⁶ suggest that one common approach to intercultural communication studies is the indigenous approach which focuses on emics, or the things that are unique to a particular culture. A cross-cultural approach would focus on etics, which has the goal of understanding the similarities or differences across cultures. This research is an initial, rudimentary attempt to gather information regarding the cross-cultural issues found in the UAE workplace by comparing the responses of foreign workers (those surveyed) to officials/executives in organizations who are native to the culture.

Over four hundred employees were surveyed to gain a large amount of data regarding workplace diversity and practices so that representative insights about working conditions across the UAE could be gathered. Officials and executives of UAE organizations were interviewed to gather in-depth information enabling a comparison between official perceptions and the experiences and perceptions of employees. After all, organizational leaders, officials and executives are responsible for developing and promoting organizational culture and practices, so their input is extremely valuable when considering diversity issues.

The quantitative component consisted of the use of 450 surveys. Many survey questions provided space for open-ended written responses by participants. Originally 550 surveys were distributed among a sample of immigrant workers across two major emirates of the United Arab Emirates, namely, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. These two emirates are typified by the presence of many immigrant workers working in major sectors such as construction and domestic work.

All survey participants were between the ages of 20 and 60 years, and consisted of 230 females and 220 males. National origins represented include the UAE, New Zealand, Jordan, South Africa, Lebanon, Australia, Palestine, Britain, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Egypt, Morocco, Bangladesh, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Gulf countries (Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia). Educational levels varied from basic diploma to the the Ph.D degree. The sample represents individuals working in places such as: courts, Ministries of Labor, schools, private health clinics, Al-Ain and Tawan hospitals, construction offices, the Transco Company (Abu Dhabi Transmission &Dispatch Company), Al-Ain and Abu-Dhabi Distribution companies, UAE University, Abu-Dhabi University, the Al-Ain Educational Zone, and the Al-Ain and Abu-Dhabi municipalities.

The qualitative component focused on individuals in official positions of power, all UAE citizens. It consisted of the analysis of data

from interviews with 13 employees from the following organizations: the Ministry of Labor, Al-Ain and Abu Dhabi courts, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Social Support Center, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These ministries are responsible for policy related to immigrants and foreign residents in the UAE. The interviewees consisted of 9 females and 4 males, between the ages of 31 and 63 years. All participants hold high school and B.A degrees. The individual interviews took 40 minutes to 1 hour to complete. Participants preferred to remain anonymous.

To enhance reliability, different-worded forms were used to measure the same attribute without changing meaning. Test-retest reliability was measured by having the same respondents complete a survey at two different points in time to assess response stability. Unrealistic surveys that showed clear contradictions and inconsistencies (such as answers about media about which users denied familiarity) were eliminated.

Survey results are provided in graphical form⁴⁷ in the Survey Results section, below.

4. Research Results:

4.1. Survey Results

The respondents were asked to respond to the questions presented as depicted in the graphs by rating their agreement or disagreement to specific questions.

4.1.1 Cultural knowledge and tolerance: It is interesting to note firsthand that, when asked whether employees were personally interested in learning about other people's cultures, a relatively large number, 52%, "strongly agreed," while an additional 40% "agreed" (See Figure 1). Regardless of actual interest in learning about other cultures, many respondents found several practical reasons for gaining knowledge about cultures that differed from their own. For example, such knowledge could make everyday dealings with coworker's easier (Figure 2). In general, cultural tolerance and acceptance, at least as an idea, was favorably viewed among those surveyed (Figure 3). When asked specifically about the efficacy of learning about a coworker's culture in as a means of facilitating communications, respondents overwhelmingly agreed (Figure 4). When the respondents were asked whether or not diversity caused disadvantages to an organization, 44% disagreed (Figure 5). Less favorably, there was a recognition that the benefits of a diverse workforce do come at a cost. There was a strong sentiment that diversity does indeed present challenges to an organization with over 70% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that diversity causes challenges to their organization (Figure 10).

Figure 1: Are you interested in learning about other people's culture?

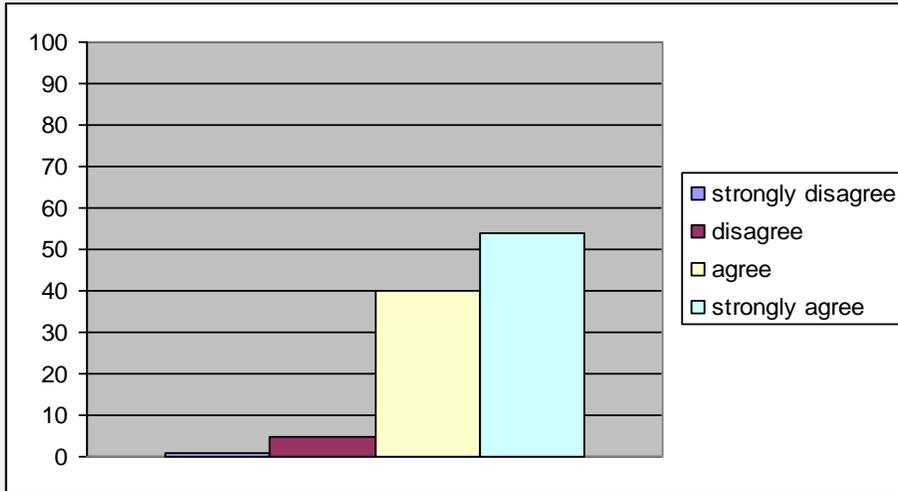


Figure 2: Do you agree that learning about your coworker's culture and/or national origin is significant for dealing well with that worker?

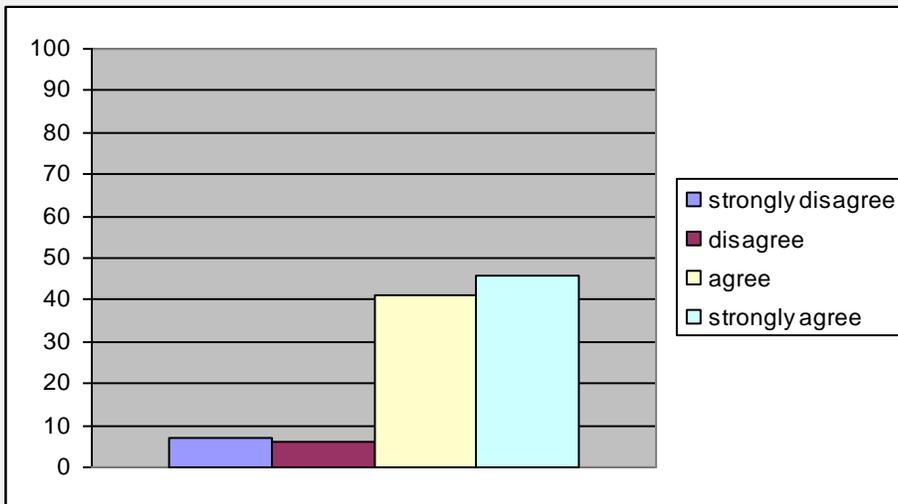


Figure 3: Do you think that the acceptance of other people's cultures provides the capability to communicate better with people belonging to these cultures?

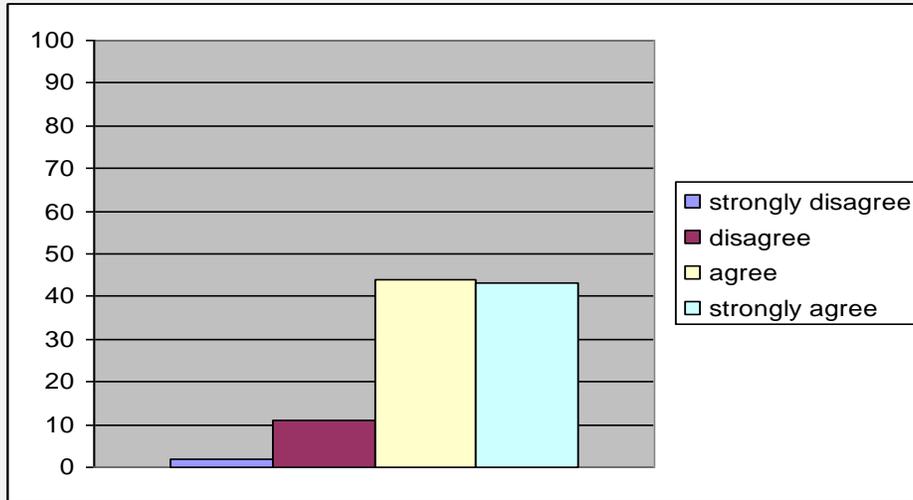


Figure 4: Do you agree that cultural diversity may possibly act like a good vehicle for the exchange of ideas?

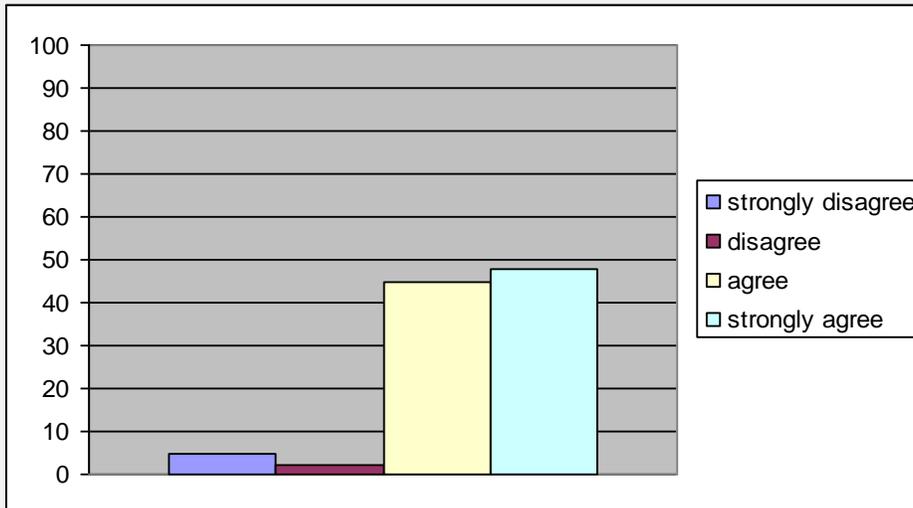


Figure 5: Are there disadvantages with regard to the presence of cultural differences in your organization? Are there merits with regard to the presence of cultural differences in an organization?

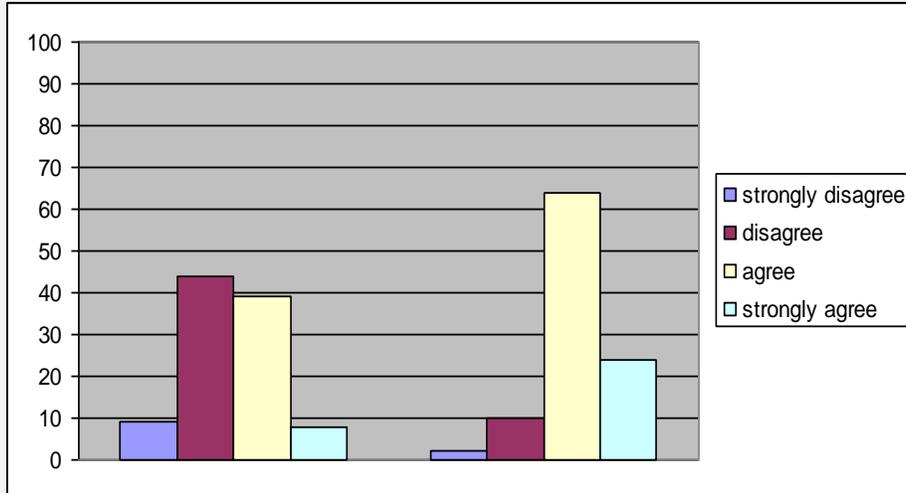
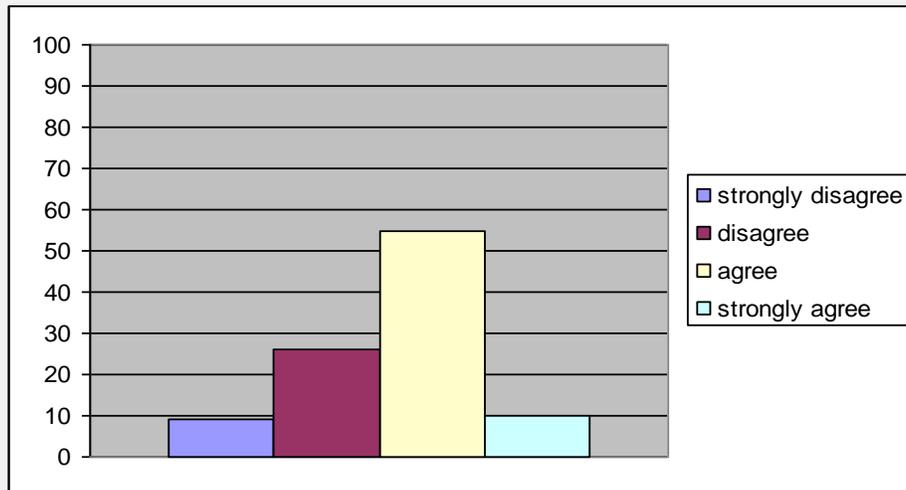


Figure 10: Do you think that cultural differences may possibly create challenges that take place inside the organization?



4.1.2 Language and Communication Issues: Diversity in language is considered part and parcel of cultural difference. When asked if there was a common language used to communicate with diverse groups, there was strong indication that a language barrier was not a concern to survey respondents, as only 11% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed with that a common language was used to communicate with diverse others. Nevertheless, this means that 15% of respondents did not believe a common language was being used to facilitate communication between workers. Respondents who worked in hospitals and in the Transco company sector said they used English frequently as a common language. Arabic also served this purpose (Figure 6). In contrast to the responses to the question regarding the use of a common language where the majority of respondents agreed that a common language was used, a significant number of respondents reported that it was not that easy to communicate

with coworkers; 28% either disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked about the ease of communicating between cultural groups (Figure 7). Most of the respondents saw value in having a diverse workforce when it came to customer relationships. Over 85% of respondents agreed that employees with diverse backgrounds are better able to communicate to customers from diverse backgrounds (Figure 8). When asked whether or not written communications are a favorable way to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds, there was a strong split with almost an equal amount of respondents agreeing or disagreeing, which might suggest that written communications have had very mixed results among different companies and groups (Figure 11).

Figure 6: Is there a common language that you use frequently to communicate with diverse workmates within the organization?

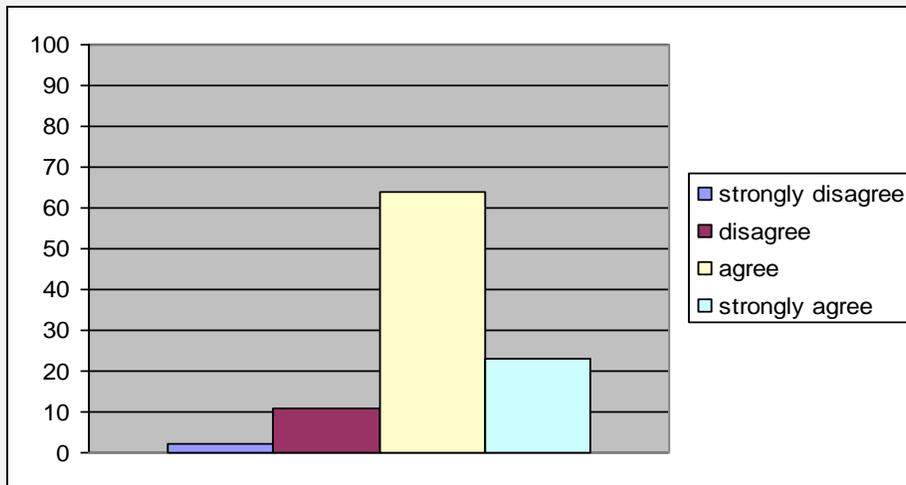


Figure 7: Is it easy to communicate with people who work inside the organization that hail from different cultural backgrounds?

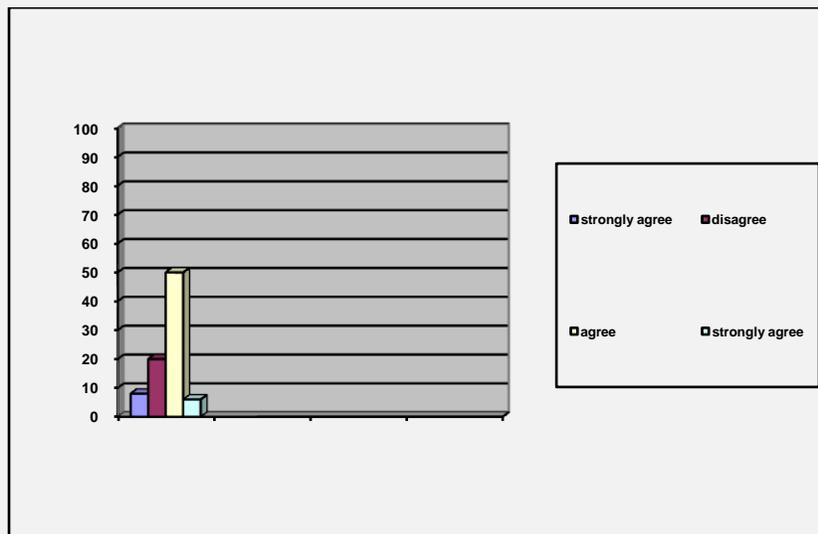


Figure 8: Do you agree that employees who hail from a diverse background are better able to communicate with the public?

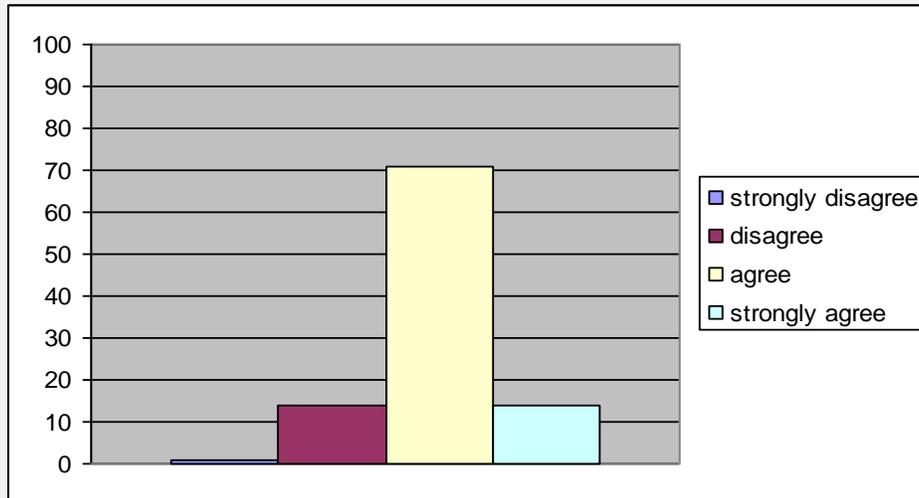
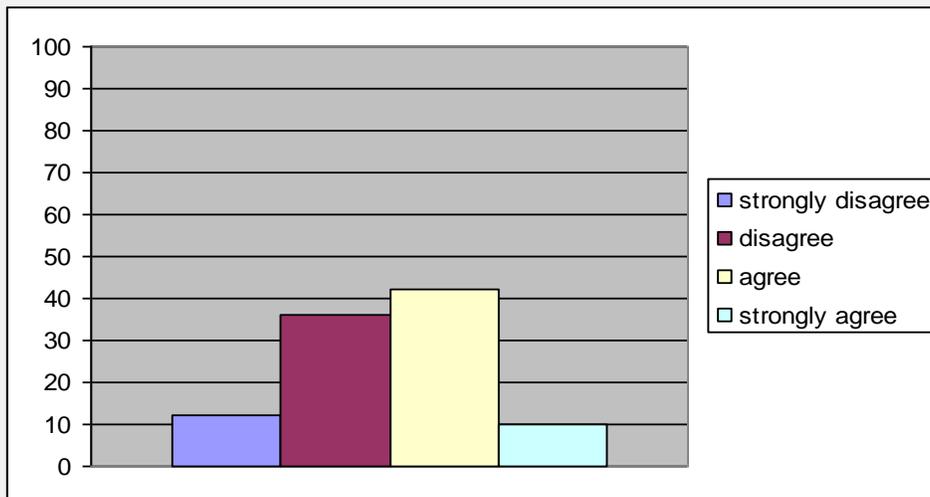


Figure 11: Do you think that written communications are more comfortable for contacting colleagues within a multicultural environment?



4.1.3 Diversity Policies and Practices: When asked whether their organization should develop new rules to accommodate cultural differences, the results were mixed, with a significant portion agreeing, and a significant portion disagreeing, although there was more agreement than disagreement with agreement over 65%. (Figure 12). When asked if there should be targeted recruitment of diverse workers into the workplace, the majority of respondents agreed, but there was a significant minority disagreement. When asked if they were treated with fairness and respect within their organizations, a strong majority agreed they were treated well, with almost 90% being in agreement with the statement

(Figure 15). Correspondingly, more than 90% agreed that employees should be treated with respect regardless of nationality (Figure 16). However, when asked if the organization was doing enough to create awareness regarding diversity within and outside the organization, over 30% of respondents disagreed. The large portion of disagreement is a result made more significant given the delicacy of the question for those with doubts about the consequences of their participation (as a general rule, more specific questions brought about more dissenting opinions) (Figure 17). For example, approximately 25% of respondents did not believe their employers respected their lives or norms outside of the workplace (Figure 18). Another sensitive policy issue has to do with company hiring practices and the recruitment and advancement policies of a diverse workforce. There was a relatively strong agreement that bias existed in their company in favor of employees from “prestigious nations” (The United States, England, the EU) in company promotion. Employees mentioned this practice as a clear violation of their rights and expressed the belief that it is crucial for each employee to be respected regardless of her or his nationality. For example, many (40%) mentioned nationality as a factor affecting their treatment. A solid majority seemed to agree that their organizations gave them an opportunity to advance their skills, yet a significant fraction (over 20%) remained that felt left out in this regard. These results seem to validate Allen et al.⁴⁸ who found that employees who hail from prestigious and wealthy nations such as the USA often assume high positions within organizations as compared to those from countries such as India and Indonesia (Figure 20).

Figure 12: Do you think that employers should create new rules that accommodate cultural differences?

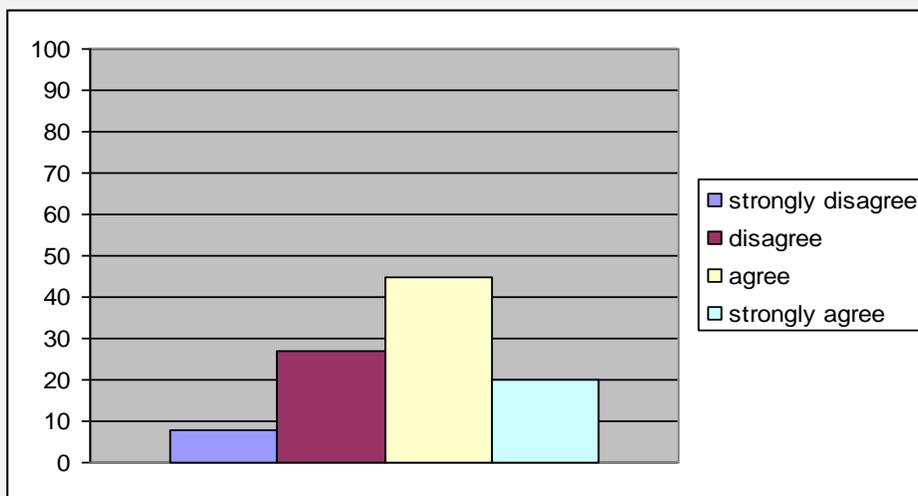


Figure 15: Are you treated with fairness and respect in the organization?

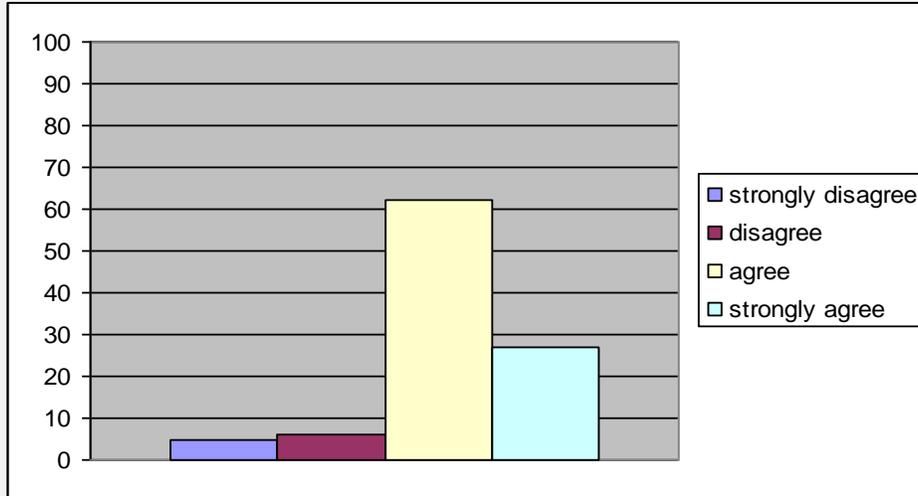


Figure 16: Do you concur with the fact that respect is a right for any member of the organization without relying on the nationality?

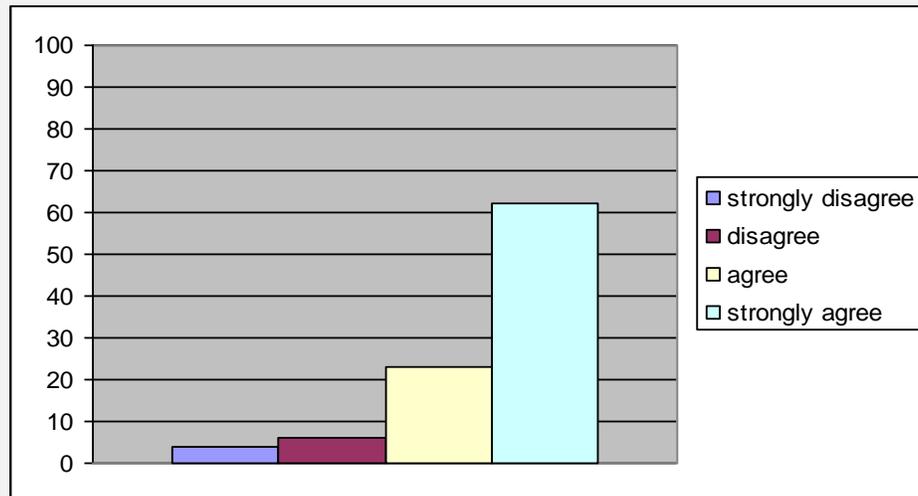


Figure 17: Do you think that the management is doing enough to create awareness regarding diversity within and outside the organization?

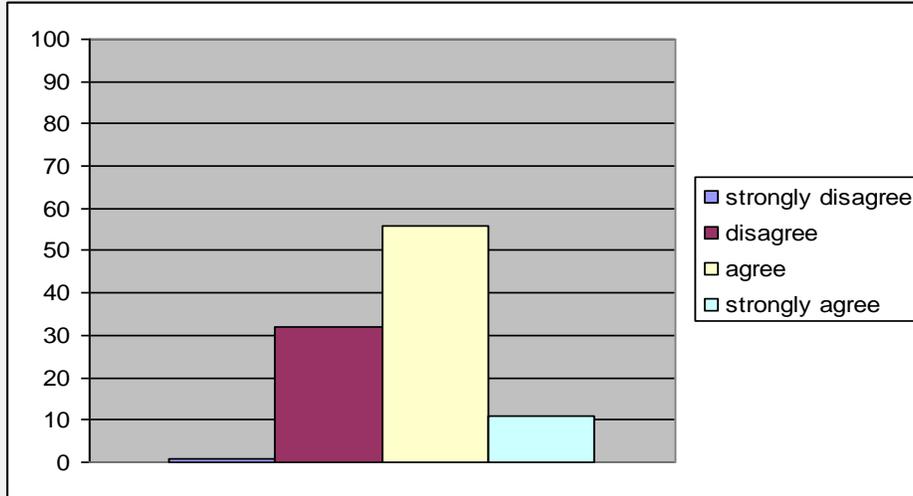


Figure 18: Is your life and commitments outside the workplace respected by your organization?

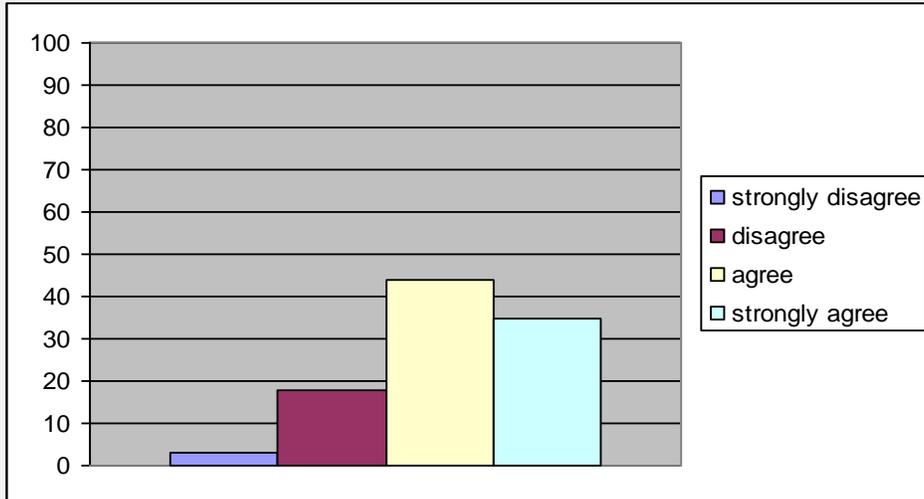
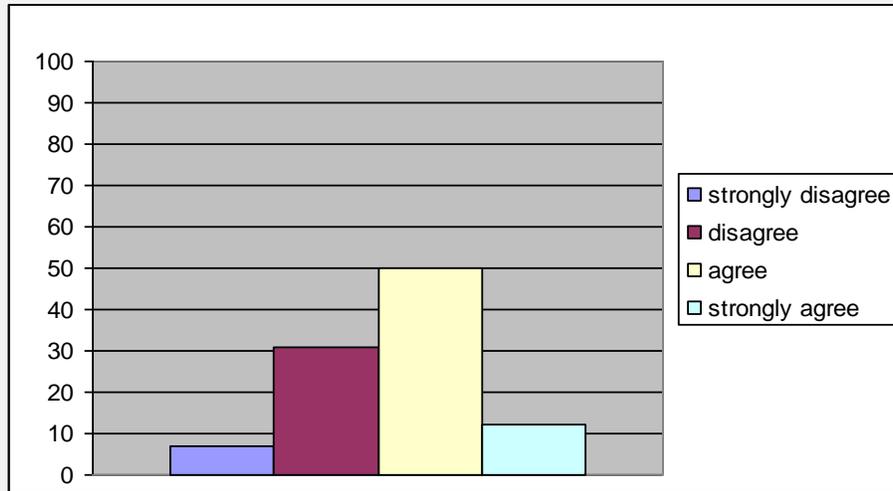


Figure 20: Do you believe that your nationality may possibly determine the manner in which your employer (s) deals with you?



4.2 Interview Results

The officials interviewed were asked open-ended questions that were similar in content to the ones asked in the survey, such as “What type of diversity is found in your workplace?” “Has the workplace diversity in your organization had positive results?” “Do you think it is important for employees to know about each other’s culture?” “What impact does diversity have on workplace communications?” “What are some of your main concerns about diversity in the UAE workplace?” “Do you feel your organization offers support to your diverse work population?” “How are employees prepared to enter your workplace regarding language, culture, and workplace requirements?” “Does nationality play a role in how employees are treated in your workplace?” “Do you feel your organization does enough to promote diversity and understanding through intercultural communications?” Interviews with officials revealed data about the makeup and characteristics of workers in the UAE, and also expressed cautious attitudes about the massive increase of foreign-born workers that has accompanied growth in recent decades. They had a tendency to think in terms of the social and political consequences of such a large foreign workforce, something that was not addressed by any of the workers.

Several interviewees took note in particular of the large amounts of South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Asian laborers working in airports, hotels, construction sites, municipal services, markets, cooperative societies, and in homes as domestics. Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Filipinos were mentioned.

- One participant described the origins of migration in terms of active recruitment as follows: “The recruitment of foreign labor to the Gulf in general is associated closely with the process of development that began in the Gulf in the seventies, and continued with the policies of

sustainable development in various fields of investment.”(Interviewee #2)

- One participant stated that: “Foreigners are here for several reasons, including the low level of working wages paid to them and employment options in Asia compared with the Arab world.” (Interviewee #5)
- Active promotion of labor importation by sending countries was also mentioned: “The introduction of Asian workers is faster and easier in various professions”(Interviewee #9).

Agencies in Asian countries like India and Pakistan operate to send labor, whether public or private. In addition, there are many laws and institutions in Asian countries working on the comfort of citizens working abroad, to protect their rights in the countries where they work.

Interviewees like interviewee # 1 and interview # 7 recognized the positive contribution of foreign labor as a tool for developing the infrastructure of Gulf countries like the UAE.

- For example, interviewee #1 stated, “Without the resources of the foreign labor market, the UAE would not have been able to modernize as rapidly because the local labor market was too small and ill-equipped to handle the amount of labor needs.”
- Another statement was, “While not ideal, the number of foreign workers has been necessary to fill the needs of labor in recent years, sort of a supply and demand issue. Demand was much higher than local supply” (Interviewee #7).
- “Honestly, local workers are not willing to take a lot of the jobs that are given to foreign workers. If not for them, the country would still be undeveloped.”

There was mostly a positive response regarding the use of foreign workers in the workplace in general.

- One respondent stated, “In the workplace, the foreign workers adapt well to the expectations of the company, learning the standards of behavior and language. Many immigrants receive training in the Arabic language or they are able to speak English well enough to adapt” (Interviewee #9).
- Another respondent said, “We work hard to prepare new hires to be able to adapt. We have them taking language and communication training and training into our work practices” (Interviewee #5).

- “The system works well. The immigrant workers need jobs, and there are many jobs to be filled here. They work hard, and there is not much turnover” (Interviewee #11).
- “Most immigrant workers are very willing to work hard and long hours. Most learn quickly what is needed on the job and how to get along with each other and their supervisors” (Interviewee #2).
- “We have new employees go through the orientation process to understand the organization’s norms and expectations. We offer extra training for those who have language needs. We also have mentors who help new hires become oriented, like long-term employees who spend extra time with the new hires to help them adapt and learn about our company” (Interview #8).
- “Our workers have the same opportunities no matter where they are from. We look for competence and effort, not where the person comes from.”

Yet negative aspects were also noted. There was concern that the country’s cultural character and heritage would be damaged. Although the mixing and cultural cooperation between skilled immigrant labor and native inhabitants was seen as positive, there was also concern about the influence of their behaviors, customs, and traditions. Some respondents were concerned that the high ratio of certain ethnic groups would lead to a breakdown in the dominant language of the native culture, namely Arabic.

- One respondent put it in terms of demographic dominance translating eventually into cultural and linguistic dominance: “The degree of mixing and numerical superiority of workers from India and Pakistan in particular could influence the Arab language” (Interviewee #11).
- Reference was made to a news item that reported that the Arab language was ranked third in terms of daily trading in the UAE after English and Urdu.
- Another interviewee stated bluntly that: “the dominance of Asian labor leads to cultural hegemony contrary to the culture and identity of UAE society. It has serious consequences for raising children and building their national and cultural identity. Many psychologists, sociologists, and education specialists warn about the negative effects on young people and the social and demographic structure” (Interviewee #10).
- “Having such a large portion of foreign workers is fine for the workplace, but there are problems due to such a large population of

non-native people with their different customs, language, religion, and lifestyles” (Interviewee #7).

Negative views regarding foreign-born labor were also expressed as a security and economic concern. There was a nostalgia expressed that in the past women local people, especially women, could walk late at night safely. Participants stated that the increase in foreign workers from different cultures had led to crime, demonstrations, protests, and the increasing cost of maintaining security. These had hindered social stability and the development plans for the UAE. Also mentioned were economic consequences such as rising costs of residence, increasing unemployment among native Emiratis, and the damaging role of remittances abroad. One participant stated:

- “Private companies show a clear preference for hiring foreign workers over the locals for a variety of reasons, such as the ability to pay less, more control over the workforce and so on. But this preference has caused tension because Emiratis who are unemployed develop resentment toward the immigrant workers” (Interviewee #6).
- Another respondent stated, “With all of these incoming foreign workers, the society is not as stable as in the past. Now, I would not want my mother or sister to be out alone for fear of something happening to them” (Interviewee #2).
- “I personally would like to see the hiring of a much larger percentage of native workers. The young people here need jobs. It would help balance the impact and influence of so many foreign workers here. But I do not see this happening any time soon because the need for labor is so high, and there are not enough natives who can either do the work or are willing to do the work. It has definitely changed our society, though, to have such a large population of foreign workers among us.”

5. Discussion

The original questions regarding diversity in the UAE workforce were:

- How effective is diversity management and communication in the UAE?
- What impact do diversity challenges have on advancement and treatment of foreign employees?
- Do foreign workers and native officials have contrasting or similar responses in their value and assessment of workplace diversity practices in their organizations?

The results from employee survey respondents point to a generally favorable view toward workplace diversity and policies promoting it. A segment of respondents, however, in the 15% to 20% range, expressed reservations about diversity when asked more detailed questions about company policy, but these were all related to the efficacy of the workplace itself.

Officials interviewed, in contrast, generally held a more cautious view toward the subject, raising both economic and nationalistic questions about the amount of diversity found in UAE organizations, especially in the private sector. While officials appreciated the contributions to the workplace made, many had concerns about the social and political consequences of having such a high percentage of the UAE's population coming from foreign countries. It is not surprising that officials expressed such concerns because the UAE has such an exceedingly high ratio of foreign workers to native workers in the workplace. While most discussions of diversity in business and communications literature concentrate on management and communication issues, discussions regarding diversity in the UAE include concerns about the political, economic and social impact of so many foreign workers migrating into the country.

Those surveyed were foreign workers who generally were accepting of new or local cultures and believed it was very important to understand their coworkers and clients too. Most respondents agreed that cultural diversity may possibly act as a good vehicle for the exchange of ideas. They supported the idea that increasing the communication between people of different cultures can serve as a basis for a better exchange of ideas. Most respondents recognized the importance of learning about local culture. Also, using a common language to communicate with others was seen as essential in any organization. Because the most common second language used in the UAE is English, and many recruitment offices in the UAE organizations required English skills for hiring, workers from diverse cultures were not found to face this form of linguistic barrier when dealing with local people. Again, however, considering that those surveyed felt a need to adapt to their workplace in order to succeed, this positive view of understanding the local culture would be tilted due to the need to adapt to that same culture. In other words, newly hired foreign workers are acutely aware of the necessity of adapting to the local culture if they want to function in their jobs, especially considering that assimilation is the model most used in UAE companies. Correspondingly, the interviews of executives showed little discussion of the need to understand any culture other than the dominant one in order to help new hires assimilate into the workplace.

A majority of respondents agreed that sharing work and working with teams from different cultures can help to overcome cultural differences through shared experiences when working within a team. A sense of fairness and the rule of law is characteristic of functioning environments, and most respondents agreed that they understood the rules in their organization and were treated fairly. Respondents agreed that cultural differences appear inside and outside the work, and that there is a correlation between the work and public environment. They also agreed that, if they understand their customers' cultures, they can deal with them more easily within their communities.

Considering the importance placed on understanding cultural factors in order to be more successful in the workplace, a question should be raised as to how much cross-cultural knowledge is emphasized within the UAE organization. In other words, although respondents placed a high value on gaining an understanding of different cultures and their effects, it remains unclear how this understanding is acquired. It does not seem to be coming from training experiences or anything more than observation and experience, albeit this experience seemed to be more concentrated when people worked in teams.

Significantly, a high percentage of survey respondents, over 30%, believed their companies were not doing enough to promote the value of diversity within their environments. This result was made more significant given the delicacy of the question for those with doubts about the consequences of their participation (as a general rule, more specific questions brought about dissenting opinions more clearly). Approximately 65% either agreed or strongly agreed with the idea that more workplace rules or policies need to be created to accommodate diverse needs. A comparable breakdown existed when employees were surveyed regarding actual policies related to the balance of life inside and outside of work. In other words, a significant number of survey respondents did not believe their customs, values, norms and so forth were considered or respected by their employers either within or outside of the workplace. This lack of consideration would most likely be recognized as an indifferent attitude about the need to gain such an understanding.

The officials interviewed agreed that training was needed for new hires in order for them to be able to communicate well in the workplace. For example, new hires might be required to take Arabic language classes. Additionally, recruitment efforts were geared toward hiring employees who could more easily assimilate because they knew English, a common language used in both private and public organizations in the UAE. The emphasis from a management perspective regarding language and communication was on providing the language of assimilation, i.e. using

the language chosen by the organization. Cultural issues were not really considered other than language issues. As reported by Jameson, adopting an official company language “does not instantly create a shared language culture or solve all communication problems”⁴⁹, yet the primary emphasis in helping new hires adapt was on language acquisition.

The management of diversity in the UAE is assimilative in nature because it requires employees to adapt to the dominant culture, while ignoring other cultural variations and factors in developing management and advancement strategies. There is no real concern about intercultural communications beyond having workers learn to understand the dominant language. Other nuances of communication such as low and high-context considerations, the ability to communicate most effectively via intercultural understanding of norms, values, etc. is not a priority. Considering the exceedingly high numbers of foreign workers in the work environments, this assimilative approach may seem the most practical rather than trying to accommodate such a variety of cultural issues. However, what may be the path-of- least- resistance is also limiting in tapping the potential that comes with a diverse workforce. Additionally, considering that assimilation is the most common approach used in UAE organizations for new hires, the ability to transcend beyond national culture to find common ground, as promoted by Jameson, is not even a consideration at this point in the evolution of management strategies in this region. To be fair, it is unlikely that most organizations facing rising diversity challenges have evolved to pluralistic or such cultural transcendental standards set by scholars such as Jameson.

This study is intended to assist in contributing to the effectiveness of intercultural communication and diversity in the work environments in United Arab Emirates by investigating the current situation. Based on results, the question arises: what can employers do leverage the potential benefits of diversity while keeping its negative impact to a minimum? It is recommended that future research be conducted to delve further into the nature and consequences of diversity in employment in the UAE. Most private-sector employers insist that, for a variety of reasons, using high numbers of foreign workers is more profitable than hiring local candidates for jobs. However, if current management and communication strategies are not the most effectual, are the short-term gains worth the long-term costs of lost talent, dysfunctional adaptation behaviors and problematic communications? Because of the density of foreign workers and the attending cross-cultural issues that are inherent, the UAE could become a “hotspot” for future research and investigation into the effects of certain types of management strategies related to intercultural communication and diversity issues.

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