
Research Note: Research in Arab Countries, Published in Arabic

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Abstract

The major objectives of this research note are to present a concise summary of research results on management and organization published in Arabic and to compare these results with findings on the same topics published in English. An extensive search of the relevant literature in Arabic produced relatively few empirical studies. Results of these exploratory studies identify the salient features of Arab organizations and management such as overcentralization and emphasis on control. However, results on the leadership style of Arab managers are conflicting. The resort to cultural factors to explain these inconsistent findings is criticized and the need for more and methodologically-sound research is stressed.

Introduction

Interest in the application of management and organization concepts and practices across nations has increased, as evidenced by the large number of books and research articles published on this topic, the numerous seminars and conferences devoted to it, and its recognition by academic institutes and professional associations as one of the core concerns of the field of management. Although the literature on comparative management available in English contains abundant information, insights and research results on organizations and management in different countries of the world, it is not exhaustive, because most researchers and practitioners outside Western industrial countries publish their findings in their native languages. Consequently, this large part of the international literature on management and organization is accessible only to a limited number of English-speaking academicians and practitioners.

The modest objectives of this research note are to present a concise summary of research results on management and organization published in Arabic, to compare these results with findings of studies published in English, and to seek a synthesis of these research findings. To qualify for inclusion in this review, a study published in Arabic must be reporting results in the field of management, organizational structure and behaviour. A further requirement is that the study must be empirical, thus excluding speculative and impressionistic studies. Case studies were excluded because the results obtained in such studies cannot be generalized.

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Management
Consultant,
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Organization
Studies
1992, 13/1:
105-112
© 1992 EGOS
0172-8406/92
0013-0006 \$2.00

Management Process

The literature on management published in Arabic addresses a number of topics such as the functions performed by Arab managers, their attitudes, and styles. Like other managers all over the world, Arab managers perform the same functions, i.e., planning, organizing, commanding, and controlling. In allocating their time, these managers, however, appear to favour some functions at the expense of others. They agree, in general, that planning is one of their basic functions, but they are found to allocate only a minimum of their time and resources to performing this function. Al-Ameer et al. (1978) report that a majority in their sample of thirteen Iraqi public firms do not practice planning. Atiah (1984) also found that Arab managers spend less of their time on planning and more on controlling and commanding. This is confirmed by results obtained by Abu Zaid (1982) who reported that the main function performed by his sample of middle-level Saudi managers consisted mainly of assigning work duties to their subordinates and supervising and monitoring their performance. Ammar (1982) also found that middle managers perform mainly routine functions such as supervising the application of laws and regulations. Indeed, the performance of the control function appears to be assigned top priority by Arab managers. It is noteworthy that these studies were conducted on Arab public bureaucracies characterized by high formalism and stress on compliance with rules and regulations. However, results obtained by Kassem and Al-Modaifer (1987) confirm that private managers also put little emphasis on planning. They claim that Arab culture is the source of the strong fatalistic attitude which discourages Arab managers from planning.

In spite of the emphasis laid on control and supervision, methods employed in performing these functions are largely traditional. Al-Ameer et al. (1978) report that managers in his sample use personal rather than systematic methods of control. According to Abu Shaar and Al-Ezza (1981), effective supervision and control by Arab managers is impeded by cultural factors. They describe the dilemma faced by Saudi public managers in trying to enforce regulations concerning attendance which conflict with their subordinates' performance of their social obligations. Another topic of interest for researchers is the decision-making practices of Arab managers. Most researchers (Abdul Wahab 1979; Atiah 1984; Hammuda 1975) found that these managers use mainly traditional methods of decision-making. Hammuda (1975) reported that 73 percent of a sample of Kuwaiti managers rely entirely on intuition and personal judgement in making their decisions. One of the major obstacles to effective decision-making in Arab organizations, as reported by Arab managers, is the paucity of pertinent, reliable and timely information (Abdul Wahab 1979; Omar 1984).

Interest in how Arab managers actually perform their responsibilities was not shared by most researchers who published their findings in English. One exception, namely Badaway (1980), confirms that Arab managers

prefer informal methods of control. Both groups of researchers (Barakat 1983; Muna 1980; Atiyyah and Al-Hassani 1981; Al-Hussaini 1984; Harastani and Al-Turki 1985; Leila et al. 1985) agree that favouritism, nepotism and personal connections have a significant impact on managers' decisions. Cultural factors such as strong kinship and family ties are frequently blamed for these negative practices.

Management Style

Several researchers who published their findings in English and Arabic directed much of their attention to management styles adopted by Arab managers. An authoritarian management style is reported by all writers in Arabic. Evidence in support of this finding are found in a number of Arab countries such as Iraq (Al-Ameer et al. 1978), Saudi Arabia (Abdul Wahab 1982; Ammar 1982), and Jordan (Al-Khaddra 1980). Some research findings published in English (Badaway 1980; Leila et al. 1985; Kaynak 1986) also support this. However, other studies conducted on managers from Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iraq (Muna 1980; Al-Jafary and Hollingsworth 1983; Ali and Al-Shakhis 1985) concluded that the consultative style is generally favoured. Whether the predominant style of Arab managers is found to be authoritarian or consultative, an explanation based on the characteristics of Arab culture is usually advanced. Thus, the authoritarian style is linked to the authoritarian nature of traditional leaders in Arab society (Badaway 1980) while a consultative style is traced to the Islamic and tribal values which encourage consultation (*shura*). In a recent paper, Ali (1989) argues that Western values and the mass media may have influenced some Arab managers to adopt a consultative style.

Employee Attitudes and Behaviour

The Arabic literature review shows little interest among researchers in describing and analyzing the attitudes and behaviour of Arab employees. A study by Al-Oudaili (1981) on a sample of Saudi public employees reported that a strong need for security and traditional and kinship ties influence their attitudes and behaviour. Other researchers found that adherence of Arab employees to work norms conducive to high productivity and efficiency is generally weak. Tardiness and high rates of absenteeism among Saudi public employees were reported by Abu Shaar and Al-Ezza (1981). As much as 20 percent of work time is spent by Saudi public employees on unproductive activities, according to results obtained by Asfour (1982). Similar findings were reported in the case of Iraq (Al-Ameer et al. 1978) and Kuwait (Al-Salem 1980).

A number of researchers, writing in Arabic, investigated the status of female employees in Arab countries. Khaleel (1979) observes that female

employees are still subjected to various forms of work-related discrimination and must work harder than their male counterparts to prove the worthiness of their labour. Furthermore, Al-Hussaini (1985) found that Saudi male supervisors generally prefer male subordinates and the idea of working under a female supervisor or manager is still unthinkable. While improvements in the status of female employees in several Arab countries have been realized, it is worth noting that only 15 percent of Arab females above the age of 15 are actually in employment.

Writers in English report a number of findings on the attitudes and behaviour of Arab employees. In an extensive study of Egyptian public employees, Leila et al. (1985) note a high degree of apathy, low concern for productivity and a strong emphasis on job security among these bureaucrats. Aversion to risk-taking (Badaway 1980; Leila et al. 1985; Kaynak 1986), strong loyalty to supervisors (Kaynak 1986) and strong friendship ties (Badaway 1980) are some of the reported characteristics of Arab employees.

Finally, a number of Arab researchers surveyed organizational structures and work methods and procedures in Arab organizations. Al-Ameer et al. (1978) identified common structural problems in their sample of Iraqi public agencies such as overcentralization and the lack of job descriptions and work manuals. Al-Khaddra (1980) found similar problems in the Jordanian public bureaucracy. Despite bureaucratic obstacles, the successful introduction of modern information technology was reported in some cases (Al-Butma 1982).

Discussion and Conclusions

Before drawing any conclusions from studies of Arab management and organization published in Arabic, it must be noted that these studies are essentially exploratory and descriptive, few in number, and often use small samples drawn from a single country. In view of these limitations any conclusion made here must be viewed as tentative.

To begin with, findings of these studies generally confirm results obtained by writers on this topic in English. They suggest that Arab organizations, especially public agencies, exhibit many of the characteristics of modern bureaucracy in developing nations as well as its dysfunctional qualities. One of the undesired consequences of bureaucratic growth is the excessive emphasis laid on control and compliance with rules and regulations. These rigid bureaucratic systems have also shown strong resistance to the introduction of modern management and organization methods and techniques.

Researchers generally regard some of the practices and the leadership style of Arab managers to be culture bound. Thus, the low priority assigned by Arab managers to planning is linked to the strong fatalistic attitudes in the Arab culture. Also, whether the leadership style is found to be authoritarian or consultative, cultural values and norms are brought

forward by researchers to justify either finding. Given the exploratory nature of these studies and the limited samples used in them, explanations based on cultural imperatives alone are unjustified.

During ten years of experience as a trainer in Arab countries, I have not come across opposition to planning on religious or cultural grounds. Admittedly, few trainees objected to the use of the term '*tanabwat*' (predictions) because only God knows for certain what the future holds. However, they were quite content with the alternative term '*tawaqwat*' (expectations) which emphasizes the tentative nature of forecasts used in planning. In their opinion, the performance of planning is impeded by bureaucratic obstacles such as the shortage of planning specialists, inadequate usable information and the strong emphasis placed on control and supervision. They explain that supervision and control take up most of their time leaving little over to devote to other duties, including planning.

Similarly, the invocation of culture to explain both the authoritarian and consultative styles adopted by Arab managers is unconvincing. This plurality of style suggests that factor(s), other than culture, may be in operation here. Furthermore, these results can be interpreted to support the fact that management styles in these countries vary with situational factors. More, and in-depth research using larger samples is needed to verify these explanations.

Finally, it has been shown that reviews of this kind are beneficial and deserve encouragement. By acquainting academics and practitioners with management and organizational concepts and practices in different countries, these reviews not only contribute to the development of a truly international management and organization theory but also facilitate the transfer of methods and techniques across nations.

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