

SAMIR MAKAREM

'ME', ITCO and HYPER-CAPITALISM

A STUDY OF DOING CONSULTANCY IN THE GULF STATES



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'ME', ITCO & HYPER-CAPITALISM

A Study of Doing Consultancy
in the Gulf States

'IK', ITCO & HYPERKAPITALISME

Een Onderzoek naar het uitoefenen van Consultancy
in de Golfstaten

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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In Memory of my Father, Said Makarem.

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Samir Makarem, 2014

Introduction

This is a book about responsibility and organization in hyper-capitalism. Hyper-capitalism is characterized by excess; that is, the absence of scarcity. The hyper-capitalism studied was a product of 'resource curse' economics (Ndhlovu & Cameron, 2013). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) are characterized by a single sector export economy. Oil revenues are almost unlimited; all other economic activity remains secondary. Social cohesion for the nationals is bought with the provision of material excess; the expatriates are kept in line through high wages and/or repressive labor practices (such as the selective use of 'exit visas' or other impingements on individual freedom). Economics, as 'the provision of material goods which satisfy wants' (Polanyi, 1959), is taken care of. It is a society whose macro economics exceeds demand. My experience has to do with the anthropology of its micro economics. In the industrial market economy of the 20th century, persons had to sell something of market value to acquire their means of existence. The goods and services sold, provided necessary income. Most of the time there was scarcity – i.e. income did not match perceived needs. The market exchange of goods and services left large numbers of people disadvantaged, poor, needy or unsatisfied.

Polanyi distinguished between the formal and substantive meanings of economics. The formal meaning of economics has to do with 'different uses of means induced by an insufficiency of the means' (Polanyi (1959) as reprinted in LeClair (1962) p. 1181). In this sense, there is next to no economics in the UAE. The other, substantive concept of economics refers to man's relationship to nature and society 'insofar as this results in supplying him with the means of material wants satisfaction' (*loc. cit.*). My study focuses on the relationship

between these two. Initially, it was assumed that companies in UAE would be 'economical' in both the formal and substantive sense. As such, companies would exist to reduce scarcity by producing products and services of value to be traded in the marketplace. It was also assumed that companies would be organized substantively around meeting their formal goals efficiently and effectively.

At first glance, the end of scarcity seems an almost universal human ideal. Social life imprisoned to the logic of scarcity seems thwarting, violent, insecure and demeaning. Society without economic scarcity would seem not (or much less) competitive and potentially advantageous to human harmony. Of course, insufficient effective demand, over-supply and a general glut of products and services would lead to economic crisis. Over-supply and under-consumption spells disaster in capitalism. That said, there were no such problems on the substantive level in effective aggregate demand in the UAE. The desire to modernize and to construct outstanding contemporary cities kept more and more expats at work while the citizens enjoyed extraordinary levels of consumption.

Thus, I was working in a sort of economic paradise, where scarcity was near irrelevant. But as will be illustrated in this book, this 'paradise' was not what I thought it would or should be. I would typify my experience more as being of a society that was 'stuck' where relationships were characterized by 'guile', rather than as desirable. In this book, society-without-scarcity will be described in terms of its substantive economy, i.e. how people acted in regards to one another in their work. The book is grounded in an empirical case study, which in turn is grounded in my consultancy experience in Abu Dhabi. The study centers on ITCO; this is the name I give to the UAE IT (Information Technology) company with which I was engaged in for many years. My access to ITCO was outstanding; I had all their email material as well as frequent visits as my resources. But understanding ITCO was another matter. As a consultant, I wanted to 'save' ITCO: make it stable, profitable, effective and sustainable. I wanted ITCO to be a 'good' place to work and a satisfying setting for employee development.

ITCO was mainly indifferent to my goals. I discovered that top management did not really care very much if the firm was 'successful' in terms of my criteria. As

long as cash throughput grew they were happy. If accounts receivable, but not and never to be received, grew even faster they did not care. That means that as long as what was billable grew and grew, management was happy; even if what was 'billable' was never really incoming. Put bluntly, ITCO could 'objectively' be bankrupt – what was owed to suppliers, personnel, etc. being larger than what would ever come in – and management still would see itself as successful and would be entirely content with itself and the company. As long as sales increased and the amounts of money passing through the bank account grew, the 'real' economic situation stayed invisible. In this sense, ITCO was a giant Ponzi (or pyramid) scheme.

When I arrived at ITCO I did not know all of this or had ever imagined it. I thought I was dealing with a major UAE¹ IT company – which indeed I was – that needed better managing. Middle management seemed indifferent to the quality of work actually delivered. ITCO sold major IT implementation projects to big players in the region, for example Oracle or SAP to major banks, airports, and telephone companies, etc. These were multimillion dollar contracts. But the projects were never completed on time or to contract specifications, requiring arbitrage and/or repair work. When it was all done with, almost every project had lost money! But the cash flow of new projects just kept coming, so there was no cash flow problem. In reality, however, the company was not actually making any money at all! It was only when the economic crisis of 2008 (in 2010) hit the UAE that I was asked to look in detail at the company's books and I discovered just how bad things really were. What I had seen when I started at ITCO was a seemingly successful, rapidly growing IT conglomerate. ITCO not only undertook large-scale, sophisticated IT projects, it also imported IT products. They were the exclusive regional agents for companies like Lenovo and Erikson, who at the time were sure-fire profit makers.

What I saw when I arrived at ITCO in 2003 was that in the over-heated market of the UAE, skilled employees were in short supply and employee loyalty was nonexistent. If ITCO was unwilling to give bonuses or raises, all eyes were on other employers who would. But the work ethic was lost. Everyone wanted lots of money, but no-one wanted to work hard. In comparison to Europe, the consultants' IT skills were mediocre and their willingness to improve was very

¹ Refer to the end of the book for abbreviations and their meaning.

limited. It was a seller's market; there was more than enough money about and a huge shortage of skilled personnel. The IT professional, or anyone who could make others believe that he/she (but it was almost always a 'he') was an IT professional, could make lots of money. But ITCO was in some trouble and I was asked to improve matters. ITCO was not delivering what was promised on time in the large projects and this could endanger future business. So I was asked to look into it and to make recommendations for improvement.

I was a skilled Oracle project implementer who had already worked for some ten years in the region. But I had decided to move; I left the Middle East to settle in Canada. Consulting for ITCO was ideal for me. It provided me with a cash flow during the move. With regular visits to ITCO and lots of online support from Canada, I could earn enough to finance my personal transition. But I was shocked at what I discovered. Later, while working on this book, I came to call the dominant work culture at ITCO 'guile' and 'stuckness'. Consultants and (middle) managers could claim anything and say anything, irrespective of the truth, in order to convince everyone that 'Things are alright'. A project could have stagnated completely, the client organization could have refused to sign off deliverables and the ITCO consultants/managers would bold-facedly tell me 'Everything is just fine'. There seemed to be little or no sense of, accountability. If one could say it, and it was in one's own interest to say it, one said it. Seemingly there was no fear of being found-out or disciplined. It was a culture of: 'One can get away with anything'. After all, if one got caught-out and fired, one could find another job in hours. Despite this, it almost never occurred that anyone was dismissed for incompetence. Employees were dismissed for insubordination or for outing criticism of the local powers that be, but not for *not* doing their job. There were lots of IT consultants about who were very poorly skilled and never delivered, but seemed to always get away with it. If challenged, they seemed to have no difficulty claiming that the problems were not their fault and that they were highly skilled in the matters involved.

My second key concept was 'stuckness'. No matter what I did in skill training, managerial change or organizational reorganization, things largely stayed the same. You could make (really minor) changes in the decor, but the drama did not change. Fundamentally, no matter what I did, ITCO remained cash-flow centred and without a record of truly successful projects. Professionalism of delivery did not improve in any significant way. The attitude of 'winging it'

without care, discipline or concern for the quality of results remained. Management knew that project results were inadequate, but as long as the money kept pouring in, they did not care. I felt an ethical imperative to deliver as promised. I thought that the quality of workmanship was somehow crucial to one's professional identity and existential well-being. But the others did not share these assumptions with me. So I engineered some minor, but helpful, changes in the organizational structure and sponsored some training sessions but these made little or no difference. After the fact, I suspect that ITCO knew that a modern company ought to have skilled foreign consultants and evidently they saw me as fitting the bill. I was 'window-dressing' and what little I achieved was fine in so far as it went, but not really very important to anyone in ITCO.

As a consultant the situation was frustrating and, moreover, for my professional pride it was not very supportive. Nevertheless, I was adequately paid, and probably because I was not really important I was allowed to see almost anything I wanted to see. Thus, my position was ideal for undertaking research. This book is as a result of having enjoyed such excellent access to ITCO.

I have already indicated that ITCO has to be understood in the context of the UAE. Outside of the oil rich Middle East, I do not think that ITCO could have ever existed as it existed. The hyper-capitalist context of Dubai and Abu Dhabi play a key role in this story. There was no shortage of money in the UAE at the time. Quite the opposite, there was more money about than anyone knew what to do with, not that the local owners and powerbrokers were generous with their foreign personnel. They paid as they needed to, and that was much better than what one could earn in one's home country, but the real riches were only for the native citizens. A European foreign hire could easily earn 2 ½ times what he/she had earned at home. A Lebanese or Egyptian hire probably earned even more in comparison to their wages in their native home, but significantly less than a European. The expats were all in the UAE because they could earn so much better there than at home. No-one came because the culture or society of Abu Dhabi was attractive; they all came for the money. Once in the UAE each group tended to socialize only with its own. I, with a Lebanese background, had almost all of my contacts in the Lebanese community. That was also how it was with every other group. Thus at work, the managers and consultants were socially organized along ethnic lines. Where in Europe you might have unions, politics or other forms of social cohesion, in the UAE there was only one's expat status

and ethnic identity. Significantly, the Lebanese who were (at some moments literally) at war with one another in Lebanon, would stick together as a more or less cohesive group in the UAE. The fact that ITCO's senior management was Lebanese also had to do with my role. The only UAE presence in ITCO was the owner; everyone else was foreign.

I call Abu Dhabi hyper-capitalist because of its enormous rapid economic growth; from 2001 to 2008 its GDP tripled (ADCED, 2012). Business was booming. Even now, for 2013, the economic growth was above 5%. Only in 2009 was there a recession for one year, and that was caused by an enormous drop in oil sales which in turn was caused by the recession elsewhere; domestic non-oil economic activity continued to grow in 2009. Thus, Abu Dhabi was and is a boom economy. This is apparent in its huge construction projects: museums, airport terminals, shopping centers, etc. Wealth is generated and consumed on a scale unheard of elsewhere. UAE knows economic growth at an unimaginable pace for the rest of the world. Life in Abu Dhabi is dominated by making, consuming and hamster-ing that wealth. Happy with a mid-size auto elsewhere, one has at least a Mercedes in Abu Dhabi. Housing, clothing, servants, eating out are all on a scale far in excess to life elsewhere. Being in Abu Dhabi is like being at the center of a wealth-producing tornado. There is a sort of stillness and order at the center of it all; but around it there is frenetic activity. All that activity has to do with wealth production and consumption. There are no traditions, culture or higher values in evidence. Everything rotates around money-making. The expats are all there to make money. None of them feel much of any loyalty to the UAE. Expats have no rights, cannot gain citizenship and remain, always, total outsiders. The nationals who form a small minority are only linked to the expats via money. There is no social or cultural cohesion. The one is related to the other by money-making and/or consuming, and nothing else. The only link between 'me' and 'them' is financial. Thus, this is existence as capitalism and as capitalism only and it is capitalism as rapid growth. Thus, UAE is hyper-capitalist. The UAE and Abu Dhabi as a hyper-capitalist context will be discussed in greater detail in *Chapter 1 – CONTEXT*.

In my consultancy at ITCO as already stated, I discovered that two features of the organization were crucial: 'guile' and 'stuckness'; these will be described in detail in *Chapter 2 – THE CASE: ITCO*. I arrived at these descriptors via grounded theory; they are inductive descriptors of the social behavior I

experienced. But they produced an enormous challenge for me. How can I understand these findings?

How does one analyze substantive economics? Economic anthropology focuses more on Africa (in work such as that of Marshall Sahlins (1972, 2000)) or on Europe (as in the work of Paul Jorion (2003) or Luc Boltanski and Eve Chaipello (2007)) than on the economies of the UAE. In **Chapter 3 – FROM ‘ME’ to ‘HABITUS’** I try to understand what I have described using modernist social studies. Thus, there is an attempt to categorize key aspects of the case study and to determine the relationships between these aspects. Firstly, there is an attempt to understand identities from ITCO via psychological anthropology and secondly from the perspective of sociability. I focus on ITCO from the perspective of Mead’s social interactionism and how identity is socially constructed in interrelationship. Subsequently, the research turns to Bourdieu’s study of economic, social and cultural capital, and how ITCO’s actants are (or are not) represented in symbolic capital, in the specific fields of action that define their habitus. In this chapter, ITCO is examined from a systems and (post-)structuralist perspective. The version of ITCO this produces is fairly static. ITCO existed thanks to the local owners will and social power to let it exist. The expat president, vice presidents, managers and consultants are all, in effect, dependent upon the local owner’s patronage. ITCO never produced significant wealth, instead, it consumed it. The mad rush for self enrichment produced bitter little renewal, creativity or ingenuity. I had misinterpreted ITCO; I had thought it was a capitalist firm like any other that needed to be profitable to exist. What value, thus, did ITCO represent if it was not money making for its owners?

While Chapter 3 does produce many insights into the rigidities of ITCO, it creates, I believe, a description that is too formal and one that is inadequately substantive. Thus, the fundamental question of **Chapter 4 – COMPLEXITY OF ITCO** is what can we learn in terms of process or occurrence from this study of hyper-capitalism? I had started the research planning to use complexity theory. But this was abandoned when I discovered how un-dynamic ITCO seemed to be. Ultimately, this study concludes that the strands of existing social complexity theory are far too Eurocentric and, therefore, not applicable to a UAE case. Complexity theory focuses on causality as *attractors* of which there are three stipulated in the theory: point, cyclical and strange attractors. My data does not

appear to fit any of these. In Chapter 3 an attempt was made to understand ITCO via modernist systems focused theory. Bourdieu's concept of habitus was helpful. A habitus is a place of social-cultural existence; a place that is a way-of-being. ITCO can be understood as a habitus. Hereby, I gained a better ability to examine the 'systemness' of ITCO. But ITCO drifts. There is movement and ultimately I am more interested in the movement than in the stasis. Even if ITCO is, from some perspectives, more static than dynamic its actants do 'live' there. There is life in ITCO; it is not all structure. With Mead/Bourdieu I end up in formal economics at too great a distance from the substantive. ITCO drifts via constant movement and small steps of change. The same stays the same by drifting to another place and form. Context or environment changes, and even to stay the same, the system has to change. Sameness is a form of change. Drift is a good way to name this process. ITCO drifts; it flows through social processes staying in many crucial ways the same. Its 'systemness' is strong and, in many ways, consistent. Eurocentric organizational studies assume the economic emergence of added-value. The substantive economy exists to provide the products and services necessary for life. In meeting human needs, economic organizations produce added-value. How that added-value is distributed is a crucial political question. But in ITCO the logic is all haywire. The products and services are already provided for. The added-value precedes production. It was already there before we ever went to work. ITCO's 'production' really was 'consumption'. ITCO's consultants and managers really did live in a 'consumer society' where they had little or no responsibility to create the means of existence of themselves or of others. This was the reign of excess with little or no scarcity. But the actants did not think about all of this and did not want to think about it. The social regime wherein they and ITCO existed was black boxed. The actants did not want to know about it, think about it or really have anything to do with it. The substantive economy without scarcity emerged as much more dystopic than I had ever imagined.

This book is iterative. Chapters 1 and 2 are essentially descriptive; Chapter 3 provides an analysis that I ultimately find illuminating, but which overstates the 'systemness' of the case. Chapter 4 illuminates the drift into 'stuckness' and culture of 'guile' which I have found as characteristic of ITCO. And, ultimately, it opens the way to seeing ITCO in terms of substantive economic anthropology.

CHAPTER 1

Context

This is a Chapter about scarcity and excess on three different levels. Firstly, Abu Dhabi is introduced to the reader and its hypermodern, hyper-real and hyper-capitalist circumstance. My focus is particularly on business and expats. This is the success story of glitter, money and more money. But it is also the story of a hyper-stratified society, where every class and group is assigned a place on the social ladder, which is meant to be immobile. Abu Dhabi is a sort of 'Disneyland', i.e. it is artificial, planned, regimented and defined by its appearances.

Secondly, I introduce myself the researcher. I am a product of hard work and struggle. I have a Lebanese background. Lebanon is a fairly 'modern' society based on trade and business; the financial sector is large, services are economically important and it is a 'free market' country. Traditionally one 'can get ahead' in Lebanon through education and hard work. I have a strong work ethic and believe that exploitation is neither desirable nor sustainable. This applies to social relations but also to an economy such as the UAE's, which is solely based on the exploitation of fossil fuels. Work, I believe, can and should give meaning to life. I have never really been poor, but I have also not been rich. Lebanon's political crises and violence drove me to work in the UAE. I have always had to work for my livelihood. Scarcity as the need to work, as dependent on having a job, and as the lack of social and political security, plays a key role in my life.

Thirdly, there is the context of social studies. Chapter Two is an extensive case study. It attempts to be 'realist'. In that way, ITCO is described with the intention that the reader will become convinced that 'I was there' and that (more than) enough information and description is provided for the reader to be convinced that he/she can perceive key aspects of ITCO. I wanted to do Action Research, i.e. to change ITCO via my work but this did not happen. I am present in the account, my 'I' or persona does play a role, but I did not want to present an autoethnography. It is not a story about 'me' but about ITCO.

Context: UAE

Between 2005 and 2011 the UAE was transformed from a traditional way of living to hypermodernity. The spectacle of a dynamic and postmodern environment engulfed the UAE, as if orientalism² was running in reverse. The UAE jumpstarted the industrial revolution and reached a stage of economic welfare comparable to western countries. The UAE created an 'ideal type' economy that *appeared* hyper-modern and even more perfect than in the West.

The theory of hyper-modernity argues that we are currently witnessing the obliteration of time-space in private and public spheres (Graham, 2005). The hyper-modernity of the UAE applies to the period of 2005 until 2011, when the exchange of material and immaterial goods took off with unparalleled urgency and intensity, directed to the fast accumulation of wealth. Western modernist capitalism can be characterized by stability, predictability, manageability and control, while hyper-modernity is characterized by change and inconstancy (Gleick, 1999).

“‘Hyper’ is an idiom that designates the excessive, reaching beyond a norm. It is located in the field of signification of superlatives, with a connotation of constant overreaching, of maximum, of extreme conditions” (Gottschalk, 2009, p. 309 translated from; Rheume, 2005). Many social scientists have used the 'hyper' prefix to discuss contemporary social trends. Phil Graham's *Hypercapitalism* (2005), Gilles Lipovetsky's *Hypermodern Times* (2005), and John Armitage's *Project(ile)s of Hypermodern(organ)ization* (2001), are but a few

²Refers to Edward Said's Orientalism (1995) that depicts aspects of how the West portrays Middle Eastern culture as static and underdeveloped.

examples of this trend. Most of these authors agree on some core aspects that distinguish *hyper-modernity* from *postmodernity*. *Hyper* emphasizes experiences of urgency, intensity, instant gratification and especially excess. The focus on excess seems especially significant, and has been a topic of research in areas as varied as occupational therapy and competition, consumption and marketing information theory and communication studies, crises and risk theory (Gottschalk, 2009). According to Armitage (2001), the key components or 'project(ile)s' of hyper-modernity are 'hyper-capitalism', 'globalitarianism' and 'militarization'. Rifkin (2000) suggests that hyper-capitalism corresponds to a broad process that homogenizes various aspects of western society, spreading the principles of efficiency and speed. Hyper-modernity proliferates with globalization, sweeping across the globe in every industry and sector. The macro-sociological forces giving rise to and shaping the hyper-modern moment are numerous, dynamic and interact in complex, accelerating and unpredictable ways. Attempting to unravel them is beyond the scope of this research which focuses on the articulations and experiences associated with hyper-capitalism in Abu Dhabi.

Ahmed Kanna, in *Dubai, the City as Corporation* (2011), examines the political implications of the practice of framing hypermodern development with the language of 'utopia' or 'Disney.' Kanna argues that the language of utopia is a political practice where the 'imaginary' and the 'real' become entangled. Coupled with ethnographic data from fieldwork in the UAE, Kanna demonstrates how the narratives of hypermodernity and utopia by the rulers, media and Western consultants have become the dominant processes of meaning construction: showing pride, indifference and prestige against the background of all those others who do menial work and just do not count in the UAE. Orientalism in reverse puffs up UAE importance, obscuring the more complex geographies of power and state-society relations. 'Utopian' UAE hides exploitation, extreme inequality and massive indifference.

Previous researchers of the UAE and its social construction have ended up deported (Ali, 2010). There are limits on the ability of intellectuals to debate the issues at hand. My ethnography is not a (un-)sympathetic reading and it is not sanitized to please anyone. I present the culture as I see it, and I offer some critiques of people who have read parts of the manuscript.

I refer to the hypermodern in the UAE as a short-hand for the present historical and social period, primarily in the advanced information and consumer-driven societies. As discussed above 'hypermodern' emphasizes the experience of urgency, intensity, and especially *excess*. Hyperreality is characterized by the way consciousness defines what is actually 'real' in a world where a multitude of media shape and filter original events or experiences (Höpfel & Kostera, 2003). To some researchers e.g. Kanna (2011), the current hypermodernity in the UAE is viewed as a means to enforce the symbolic power of its rulers. The hypermodern entails a sense of infinite possibility, where each possibility is rooted in what Baudrillard called 'spectacle'. Baudrillard (1993) states, "Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one's own existence, there is nothing for it but to perform an appearing act without concerning oneself with being — or even with being seen. So it is not: I exist, I am here! Rather: I am visible; I am an image — look! Look!

In the UAE, hyper-capitalism has brought opportunities and challenges, allowing local firms to increase their leverage and create enormous lines of credit. Investment in real estate and information technology moved at a faster pace than ever before. As hyper-capitalism unfolded, the UAE's traditional culture was displayed and acted out as a spectacle for visitors. For instance tribal dances are performed in airports, a fifteen minute show for travelers. The years from 2005 until 2009 can be characterized as years where an abundance of resources and fast growth were overwhelming. Building, creating an IT and telecommunications infrastructure, constructing roads and cities, often occurred within a few months. An observer might ask for whom and why all of this was being built? Was the rapid growth just risky excess? But the UAE nationals felt proud, associating their new identity with capitalism. Many companies in the UAE, and the one studied here (ITCO) in particular, grew their revenues into the multi-millions. The UAE was going (post-) (hyper-)modern (see Figure 1).



(c) Naufal MQ / Shutterstock.com

Figure 1. Aerial View of Abu Dhabi before and after 2003.

Landing at Abu Dhabi Airport you see spots of greenery in the midst of a desert. The majority of people coming to the UAE are foreigners, who are either visiting or living in the UAE. Entering the passport control, only UAE nationals sit behind the desks, but everyone else from the baggage handlers, to the airline officials, to the taxi drivers, are foreigners. Of the five million population 9% are nationals and 91% are expats. Non-UAE residents, or 'expats', or 'wafeedeen' as they are called, cannot obtain citizenship.

For the past three decades, UAE has been in a constant state of change, due to increased oil revenues and the effects of globalization (Ortega, 2009). The UAE is attributed with having successfully utilized its resources to establish a stable and fairly flexible economic and political system, compatible with growth (Forum, 2011-2012). Abu Dhabi is the largest oil producer in the UAE, exporting more than 85% of the UAE's total oil output. Historically, the UAE had been a land of trade. In the early 1960s, oil started to become the main source of revenue. The rulers have distributed portions of the wealth to the national population, often as a means of buying loyalty and preventing turmoil; in a system referred to by some as 'sheikhism' (Kanna, 2011).

UAE nationals own all the firms where the expats work. *Expatriates* cannot own any assets or property in the UAE as per the Federal Laws. Thus, the wealth remains with the owners while expatriates accumulate compensation from their salaries and bonuses. The right of use of common lands likewise belongs to the rulers of the Emirates, who grant it to other UAE nationals. Business is organized along family-based social networks of nationals.

The current UAE rulers and their extended families were allied with the British mandate during the 1970s, allowing them to effectively oppose other UAE nationals who demanded a fairer distribution of revenues. Maintaining close ties with the West has allowed the continuation of their rule. On the one hand, oil revenues are mostly distributed to UAE citizens through bidding for major projects in the oil and gas industry, and for lucrative construction projects. UAE citizens are the primary beneficiaries of these revenues and the opportunities they bring. On the other hand, foreigners (or *wafedeen*) are mostly uncritical of their lack of rights and citizenship, because they gain wealth, security and leisure unlike anything they would have achieved in their own country.

UAE nationals claim that two global events reversed the fortune of the UAE and in particular that of Dubai. The first was the collapse of the USSR causing thousands of Russians, with hundreds of millions of dollars, to come to the UAE to exchange and launder their money for goods and to create legitimate bank accounts. The other event was the British decision to hand over Hong Kong to the Chinese. This led many British or Commonwealth citizens to leave Hong Kong for the UAE. An expat from South Africa said he adores living in Dubai: "[It] being much different from living in South Africa nowadays." He mentioned:

“...perfect security, kids enjoying the beach, and going to school. It looks as if every tree has a gardener attending to make it live! For my wife and me, the UAE shows a perfect desert-living environment with all modern and postmodern assemblages. People enjoy all kinds of entertainment found in different parts of the world converged into one location, where services and help-labor are cheap and you live a life without taxes.”

The UAE enjoys a privileged position that few western countries can match: incentives offered by political and economic stability, tax-free incomes, sophisticated high tech infrastructure, good business support facilities and a high quality of life. The UAE has succeeded in exploiting these advantages and has established itself as a leading location for western and regional corporate businesses as well as a preferred tourist destination.

The UAE maintains a stable and flexible federal governmental system, based on ethnocracy (Kanna, 2011). The government meets to formalize laws, which have previously been agreed upon in separate family and independent meetings. Since there is no elected parliament, meetings are conducted unofficially among the rulers and other influential UAE families. Several social strata exist in the UAE: the ruling family, influential UAE nationals, the expatriates as the main administrators and technicians; and the non-influential UAE national groups comprising of farmers, smaller merchants, and managers in government institutions.

A significant sociological feature that strikes any newcomer to the UAE is the social stratification in each of the UAE's seven emirates. The UAE's national or local society consists of: (1) the rulers, usually called *sheiks*, who belong to the first families who settled in the UAE. Members of this group hold the highest political positions and have immense wealth and prestige. (2) The supporting families who out-number the ruling families, but are closely related through marriage. These, in turn, hold political positions, but all decision making has to be endorsed by the ruling family. (3) The trader class who are usually linked to the *sheikhs* and hold power over the major trading agencies that control the import of brand name goods and services from key world corporations. In addition, there are (4) the new middle class professionals, who have studied abroad in English-language western universities, and have returned to the UAE to be appointed to high-ranking positions; and, finally (5) the lower-income

groups, mainly newly settled Bedouins who flock to the UAE when conflicts or struggles happen between tribes in the neighboring countries.

The groups of companies that UAE nationals own usually carry their family names. Some examples are Bin Buti, Al Majed, BINHOOMODA and Al Hamed. People describe how, for example, the Audi brand is associated with the name of BINHOMOODA, and has been for several decades. Driving through the streets in Abu Dhabi or any other Emirate, large advertising signs from these groups of companies, and the brands they represent, are a ubiquitous feature. The brands range from automobile companies to construction companies, to electronics and IT. Wealth and family position in the UAE is based on how large the groups of companies are that you control and who you represent.

Status among UAE nationals is linked to their relationship to the ruling families. Familial status is seen as part of UAE citizens' social identity and hence helps to define one's relationships to and expectations of others. Those with higher status are more trusted by the ruling families and are able to accumulate wealth faster. In some cases, the ruling *sheikhs* transfer ownership of their assets to higher status members to be managed by them inconspicuously.

After many years of very conservative rule, the UAE leadership started to implement a market economy with assistance from international organizations, consultants, and governments. What was regarded as necessary for a functioning market was constructed from scratch: stock exchanges, financial regulations, judicial system, duty-free operations, etc. By 2005, the UAE was a global destination for individuals from all around the world. Its proximity to oil rich countries, like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, and by being close but outside of several regional conflicts, attracted capital, investment, talent, tourists and prestige. Capital started to flow into the UAE and the fortunes of many in the UAE grew. In the years after the wars in Iraq, the UAE focused on showcasing itself as the spearhead of modernization in the Persian Gulf. Dubai supposedly could be anywhere; the city claimed to be the ideal case of globalization. The UAE nationals wanted to catch up with (hyper)modernity.

The UAE was seen, by expatriates and visitors alike, as an agglomeration of internationally oriented businesses and financial services, an example of 'post-

Fordist capitalism³. In a short period of time, global companies began to locate in order to provide services and earn profits. The rapid flows of capital, information, goods and services across national lines allowed for the production and consumption of modernity. The UAE maintained these rapid movements to allow for more capital flow and economic growth. This dependency on rapid movement brought the UAE into the hypermodern and made the UAE into an exemplar of hyper-capitalism. With the advent of triple digit growth, during the years 2005 till 2009, in the real estate and construction industry (valued at over US\$ 600 billion), hyper-capitalism allowed for fast flows of capital and financing to reach the UAE.

The pace of change had been extremely fast. Pre-modern cities were subjected to waves of newcomers. Rapid population growth through the importation of labor put great pressures on society. Social differentiation, however, was apparent. You are a UAE national or an expat, a professional or a skilled or unskilled laborer. As such, the traditional structure of cities such as Dubai may have been ruptured; but visible segregation exists between where nationals live, where professionals can rent and where laborers can stay.

By 2007, the hypermodern environment became quite apparent. The rapid execution of projects costing billions of dollars produced luxury buildings and resorts. In addition there was the construction of world-first projects, such as a huge palm island in the sea, or the 'World in Islands', dozens of the world's largest shopping malls including an artificially constructed ski hill. Ski Dubai (see Figure 2) is located in the largest retail complex in the region, and operates at a temperature below zero, being more like a 'ski in a box' adventure. The ski area is covered with real snow year-round. Of course, the ski hills are fake mountains built from concrete, covered with snow in an air-conditioned environment. Everything inside the resort is so 'real,' however, that it seems more real than real. Ski Dubai is an imitation of something that never actually existed in the Gulf region, but once inside the resort, one experiences a ski resort more perfect than the thing it represents.

³ In a Post-Fordist regime of accumulation, firms exhibit a penchant for 'flexibility' to meet demands of changing consumer requests and continuously improve processes (Amin, 1994).



(c) David Parker Brown,

Figure 2. Dubai Mall hosts the only 'in-ski' mini resort.

The construction sites in and around Dubai and Abu Dhabi witnessed 24-hour work shifts in which thousands of buildings were erected during a three-year period (see Figure 3).



(c) N Richani.A.Saab, Connect Creative Services

Figure 3. Skyscrapers under construction, UAE, 2008.

A rapid inflow of international companies occurred. These companies built offices and employed almost anyone with experience in an effort to capture a piece of the investment cake. The government allowed off-shore companies to set up offices without a local UAE sponsor.

Hypermodernity in the UAE mediates many processes. Organizations thrive on radically different notions of time, space, work, identity and relationships than do organizations in Western societies, which value modernity. Pre-modern values of tradition, watchfulness, stability and adaptability remain strong.

Hypermodernity has brought opportunities for the ruling elite and influential family members to be recognized globally. Luxury and first-of-a-kind projects, like a palm island of a constructed ‘world’ of dredged islands made from sea sand, create symbols that make UAE nationals content, allowing them to display a new identity to the world that is very different from the archaic desert tribal culture held by many. The old buildings and sites became heritage sites, displayed as tourist areas. In contrast, professionals and foreigners caught up in the hypermodern UAE economy earn money and acquire whatever they can buy with it. An ever-increasing proportion of life is spent in malls, airports, hotels and restaurants, or in front of TVs and computers.

Some people living in the UAE view the hypermodern as mere appearance. Daily conversations between expatriates and newcomers to the UAE focus on the hyper speed of change. It seems as if the UAE and its rulers keep demanding the latest technologies in every domain: construction, IT, finance and education. A question that is constantly asked is: “How fast can anyone adapt and cope with these changes?” The lack of integration of the hyper-change in the UAE’s laws and processes elicits a feeling of uncertainty. Expats try to maximize their earnings, while the consequences of individual or corporate failure are still unclear. A media manager in Dubai commented on his experience of accelerated living: *“This nation is living in a fantasy world; we do not have the time to acquire either the knowledge or ability to impact human experience.”*

Some of the most expensive projects during the last ten years have focused on sustainability and IT. A media expert, N Madi, talked to me about how government and semi-government organizations were advised to assist in building the country. She recounted⁴:

“The UAE initially tried to follow the developing world in building skyscrapers and urban villages, assuming that people will come to buy and invest. The numbers of these living units exceeded demand. Over one million newcomers

⁴ This and other quotes are transcribed from interviews.

aren't coming now to the country. Having succeeded in its real estate projects, the need to have a comparable industrial infrastructure was the second wave that UAE rulers began to invest in.

Dubai's impatience to have the first metro in the Gulf is an example of the need to have the best at whatever cost. The metro cost tens of billions of dollars without reasonable or coherent planning on whom and for what purpose such infrastructure would be built. One could consent that eventually tourists and some laborers and low-income residents might use it. But when it comes to investing billions into a nuclear plant that from examples from all around the world show their extravagant costs and risks, you are left to wonder why they would do so. The pride of having a zero-carbon emission or zero-waste, as promoted by the Masdar City project in Abu Dhabi, sits in controversy to the tons of carbon emissions from drilling and extracting oil, while at the same time Dubai's project of the artificial islands pose sustainability challenges by disturbing the habitat of the sea and all these were overlooked for the irresistible lust to be the first and to have the best. But when it comes to art, I was stunned to know that Abu Dhabi is building a cultural city full of the greatest museums of the world. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, for example, is a planned museum that will be the largest in the world covering, a 30,000-square-metre building by the sea, when culturally the country's repository of art is purely natural history."

Jead a project manager based in Lebanon and staying temporarily in Abu Dhabi discussed his experience:

"The UAE today looks and feels like Disneyland. You have all the areas for entertainment, eating, partying, skiing, meeting people and even dining between the clouds in a hot-air balloon. There are always festivals going. But because of these possibilities, it has become very expensive to live and save money here."

Another expat:

"Everything changes from week to week and you tend to feel indecisiveness about almost everything. You are encouraged to invest in those new built apartments and make some fast money by selling them before they are completed, especially when the banks call you to give you money without even demanding a salary certificate or an account on their premises. Other times, you feel that new companies are flocking to the UAE and hence you should look

for better opportunities, as you hear that many have doubled their salaries by doing so.”

The media heavily advertised the ‘dreams’ of the UAE lifestyle. Banks provided liquidity and easy credit to buy houses and cars. Most of the expats’ real purchasing power did not include such up-market investments (though some did invest in real estate or buy luxury cars). Everyone felt the drive to be part of what was going on in some way or other; that much was apparent. There was no doubt that what was being offered in credit and products was significant.

As the real estate market boomed (see Figure 4), nationals could buy shares in new real estate companies that were showing profit growth in the triple digits. All the new companies were owned by the government and were called semi-government enterprises, but had a special status granted by the rulers allowing them to issue shares to the public. Expatriates originally were not allowed to buy and sell securities except through brokers that were mainly UAE nationals. Shares of companies could triple in value in a matter of weeks. Many UAE nationals and expats were encouraged to invest in shares of these companies.



Figure 4. A booming real estate race, UAE, 2008.

The rush to buy real estate shares encouraged other semi-government companies to create an IPO and get listed on the stock exchange. Bank managers and company CEOs commented to me about these new IPOs, stating that some of the companies barely made profits, or that their profits never grew, but that their shares were rising in the triple digits because people were buying with no due diligence regarding the real value of the shares.

Buying and selling were not fully automated. Transactions had to be processed by the exchange's employees on their own in-house computers. An investor in the stock market, with more than three hundred thousand dollars to use from banks, recounted his story: *"I used to receive tips from a high-ranking UAE national on when to buy or when to sell; one night I received a call advising me to sell all my shares the next morning."* However, because of the backlog of people selling on that day, he lost 70 percent of the value of his shares, as his transactions were only executed by mid-day, which was too late, as the market had tumbled by then.

For a few, the current hypermodernity represents challenges and opportunities. For many, in particular the generation of UAE nationals, who remember their Independence Day, hypermodernity is perceived as a threat to traditions. However, the younger generation seems engaged and entertained by the extravaganza that hypermodernity brings.

Context: The Researcher

The impetus for this research comes from my experience working in the Middle East. My experience prompted an initial research question: Why are people (actants) in the Middle East 'stuck' and not progressing professionally or socially in their organizations? This leads to the more skeptical question: Do people have a purpose that leads to transformation and change? In the often-contested situations of business, are there good reasons to change, to choose continuity, to care about sustainability or to be loyal? I started my research wanting, via participative inquiry, to explore, describe and comprehend 'stuckness and (non-)change' as it happens in the 'living present' in organizations in the Middle East. Over the years, I have watched capitalism in the oil rich Persian Gulf states develop, more often than not illicitly and corruptly. I have also seen the impact of hyper-capitalism on the lives of managers, executives and local national owners. Wealth often is immediately transformed into some form of social or symbolic prestige. Everyone shows constantly how much they have. Wealth is now; the future seems to have little relevance.

These questions have caused me to reflect on and reconsider my own consulting experiences and practices. This, in turn, encouraged me to adopt an

introspective perspective, trying to better comprehend the meaning of my behavior. Could the ‘differences’ that appeared during interactions and conversations lead to (needed) transformations? Should I adopt an autoethnographic or a more traditional research stance? As I researched, I discovered increasingly that my own assumptions needed examination and revision. While I will write about this in Chapter 4, I was forced to realize that, at a certain point, the danger of an excessively narcissistic book existed. I had to choose: Would the book be about me or about the case (ITCO)? I decided that the ethnography should come first.

However, to start, I’ll provide a few words about myself.

I was born in Venezuela and lived most of my childhood and early teenage years in the city of Maracaibo. Venezuelans live a simple life and try to enjoy every moment of it. Almost every week there were parties where people would dance the *merengue* until very late in the night. When I was thirteen, my family relocated to Lebanon. I continued my studies in Lebanon in English, though Arabic is the first language of the country. I learned to speak Arabic, but cannot write it at all well.

My mother had only a secondary education. My father grew up in a working-class environment and did not finish secondary school. Both played an important role in encouraging me to complete secondary school. They were determined that their children would fulfill ambitions that they had been unable to fulfill. My secondary education occurred in a small town in the hills of Beirut. The curriculum focused mainly on the sciences and mathematics. Because I did well in mathematics and science, I was encouraged to continue my education in engineering. Engineering was a professional career known to bring higher social, symbolic and economic capital. In 1976, I graduated with an International Baccalaureate degree and went on to study electrical engineering at the American University of Beirut (AUB). I graduated in 1980.

What brought me to the UAE in the first place? After finishing my engineering studies, I found that the job opportunities in Lebanon were slim. I decided to leave for the Persian Gulf states, where large projects funded by oil revenues were common. I first chose Saudi Arabia, as I had trained at an international company during my summer internships. The job at Bechtel was mainly

electrical engineering, related to building one of the world's largest airports. The hardship environment in Saudi Arabia, as well as the limited freedom to travel that existed due to one's passport being confiscated and the requirement of obtaining entry and exit visas every time one travelled, was uncomfortable to say the least. I moved back to Lebanon and continued my studies in business administration while, at the same time, learning computer programming. During my last year in university, I assembled one of the very first personal computers, using an Intel 8080 chip (the very first PC chip on the market). Computers and programming continued to intrigue me. After leaving Bechtel I spent several months teaching myself programming and various computer languages so as to re-start my career as a programmer. I was lucky to be offered a job in programming at a small company that developed banking computer systems. I really had very limited programming knowledge. After two years of work in designing and developing banking systems, I stumbled on the idea of designing an on-line transactional banking system. It still took several years until the first on-line banking system was implemented in Lebanon.

The war in Lebanon in 1982 and 1983 forced me to travel outside the country again to find work. I went to the UAE, where I started as a programmer designing and developing supply chain systems. I soon realized that my work was constraining. I liked having the freedom to innovate and create new systems, but I was working for a large company and was expected to follow rules and procedures. I moved about, only to find that I could not be myself unless I had the freedom to find solutions without lots of constraints. I landed a consulting job in 1984 with a new start-up firm. I was extremely happy, as I had the freedom to grow the business and work hands-on with executives. I felt that my life had changed. I excelled at bringing in new clients. The world of business systems intrigued me, as I learned about supply chain systems and financial accounting systems.

I started working for Oracle in 1994 and stayed there until 2003. While working for Oracle, I developed good relationships with several companies in the Persian Gulf region, one of them being ITCO. I had been a high achiever at Oracle, exceeding my sales targets year after year. I grew Oracle's business in the region from a mere 1 million dollars in 1994 to over fifty million in 2003. But by the end of 2003, I had immigrated to Canada and needed consulting work involving travel back and forth from Canada to the UAE. And that is where ITCO came in.

During my Oracle period, the Y2K (year 2000) change-over was a major issue. Many IT multinational companies flocked to the region to pre-empt their Y2K problems; IT sales and consulting revenues boomed. Since then, I had lived in the Persian Gulf for over fifteen years and worked in numerous companies, all within IT. Most of these companies employed foreigners. ‘Expats’ come from all over the world, many from India and Pakistan, and still others came from Lebanon, Syria, Britain (UK), the USA, Africa, The Netherlands and France.

Moving into Canada was a major endeavor. I had not attempted to get a job while waiting for the immigration papers. I had thought that finding jobs in North America was an easy process. The North American economy was growing and I thought that finding a job was just a matter of time. Having some contracting work in the UAE seemed like a good fall-back option, just in case. I managed to get two contracts, one with Oracle to develop an online partner network and another with ITCO to study their project practices. ITCO had problems with lower profitability from its operations and projects. These contracts set me up to start an independent consulting business from Canada.

I assumed that organizations needed to keep on improving. I was fascinated with America and how technologically advanced it was. I used to get annoyed seeing people entrenched in attitudes purely based on tradition, such as in social class and community segregation. My work encompassed recognizing the symptoms and problems of organizational failure, and conducting cause and effect analysis to identify solutions. Root-cause analysis entails continuously asking ‘Why’ questions. The technique is called ‘fishbone’ or ‘Ishikawa’ method⁵. The end results are that various alternative solutions are discussed with stakeholders to help them reach decisions.

By 2004, I had spent several weeks working with ITCO’s executives and managers trying to identify potential solutions. A turnaround was needed in a matter of weeks. I remember that some of my recommendations stipulated dismissing a small number of employees and in many cases, demoting others. In a matter of eight weeks, the decision to re-structure ITCO was taken and a new director for service operations was recruited. I helped in hiring the new director

⁵ Cause and effect analysis was devised by professor Kaoru Ishikawa, a pioneer of quality management, in the 1960s. The technique was then published in his 1990 book, *Introduction to Quality Control* (Ishikawa, 1990).

and two new division heads. There was an environment of fear within the company and many felt threatened by the decisions. There were a lot of rumors concerning the unfairness of the decisions. Many employees resigned. Nevertheless, in my judgment, the decisions made were right and justified, and I stood by them.

Discussions that took place were meant to help ITCO executives understand that the strategic objectives should be changed from just gaining market share, to gaining and focusing on profitability. After all, ITCO was a services company and gaining market share with no profit was unwise. Sales and consultancy achievements have to be measured on profitability and not just on revenue. To meet such goals, several change initiatives were discussed to help reduce project risk, enhance governance, and improve implementation methodology.

I managed to remain an external consultant to ITCO, and was contracted to follow up on the implementation of the changes and decisions. I was embedded in the everyday operations, and would communicate mainly by email. I was copied on most internal email, and when that was not possible, the president would send me emails for my comments. I would travel and visit ITCO every three months.

My preference was to find full-time work in Canada. But without a personal network and a successful track-record in Canada that was very difficult. In addition, I could earn more money for the same amount of time with ITCO. I did get a few change management assignments in different industries in Canada: retail, health and real estate. To my surprise, I found very similar management and operations mentality as in the UAE. I had thought that Canadians would be more open to new ideas and paradigms. In fact all my assignments had to follow a model dictated by the customer. I had to deliver what a senior vice president or CEO wanted, even if that defeated all chances of successful implementation. In one case, the client asked me to engage and implement a plan before even studying or conducting an analysis of what the impact of the change might be. It was clear that the required plan would make matters worse. Ultimately, I refused to comply and abandoned the assignment.

Thus, I had lived in the Gulf for twenty years and worked for numerous IT companies there. Most of these companies, mainly employed expats coming from Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, India, Pakistan, Syria, Britain (UK), the US and

Europe. I had started my career as a programmer, and then moved up to becoming a director of sales and consulting, and ultimately worked as a freelance consultant.

It had struck me that people from the Middle East will constantly argue. They always blame others for mistakes, never admitting that they could be the cause. There was a distance between people of the same village, the same religion, and in the same company. I always wondered why it was that people stuck to their argument or truth, until there was a winner. In Venezuela, people got on with their lives as if they knew that there was little value in arguing for the sake of arguing. I see (and saw) that 'stuckness' leads to a lack of progress in organizations in the Middle East. Although there is rich literature that describes change in general, there is very little written about business in the Middle East.

Below an anecdote follows which provides some evidence that 'stuckness' in normal daily conversations and meetings in organizations obscured reflection and progress. The description contains the first person narrative account of an event which influenced the course of my research. Described below is an event that prompted me to want to better understand why Middle Eastern managers and employees (actors) in organizations throughout the Middle East are 'stuck' and how they justify the lack of movement. *'Someone today is to be blamed'* orients the reader to some fundamental aspects of interaction in this context. It illustrates ways that mature and senior managers utilize rhetoric to suppress possibilities for change and to ignore the ideas of others. Managers with years of experience are 'stuck' with beliefs that their management methods are always right and will not accept change or being questioned about their assumptions.

“Someone today is to be blamed”

It is usually at the end of the month that all the managers of the Oracle Middle East divisions meet in a luxurious hotel to discuss the end-of-month results. I always liked the hotels; they gave me a feeling of ‘freedom’. There would be more than 14 managers attending from different nationalities and countries. The vice president was Palestinian; there would be 4-5 Lebanese, 2-3 Egyptians, 2-3 Indians, 1-2 Europeans and 1 Saudi. It was a fairly diverse group.

The vice president would start the meeting summarising the past month’s results and would list issues for discussion. He would then invite people to comment and explain; most of the time the biggest question was why we had not met the target numbers for that month.

After attending similar meetings in the past, I could always tell that the vice president would have someone in mind to blame for missing the end-of-month results. When the results were positive, I felt that he considered himself the reason for the success. In many instances, I would step in to defend the ‘victim’ the vice president had chosen. I believed that it was never the fault of only one person, or one department, for our results. The products and solutions that were sold depended on the whole organization and not on one single division, and this is often the case in similar organizations. My stepping in to defend the ‘victim’ was based on this belief, and the fact that I was also responsible for the overall divisional revenue in the region. Nonetheless, the vice president would still blame that initial person for the shortcomings of that month.

I always had my free voice and I could raise my concerns and pinpoint what I saw as right and wrong. However when I did so, the meeting would turn more tormenting and the debates more acrimonious.

In similar to these and other interactions, people talk but seem to reify matters, as if what is under discussion existed all by itself. People in the Middle East, I think, see themselves as if inside their reifications. Conceptually, we place bad results and our responsibility outside of ourselves, in the world, as if we could

not do anything about it. Our 'stuckness' manifests itself at the level of relationships. We protect our own selves at all costs and refuse to address and solve problems together. We do not share responsibility – problems are never 'ours', certainly not 'mine', but always 'theirs'.

But there is a positive, even lavish, side to it all. In Abu Dhabi, it is not uncommon to continue business meetings during dinner-time at a restaurant. I was invited to attend such meetings, from time to time, during my consulting visits. Abu Dhabi's myriad of restaurants is a reflection of the luxury of the new construction era. Every hotel in Abu Dhabi hosts a series of restaurants with extravagant finishing and decoration. A Brazilian restaurant, serving kebabs, displays all sorts of artefacts made from trees of the Amazon and a ceiling covered with carved wooden faces. A Polynesian restaurant features a Polynesian boat hanging on its wall and serves exquisite cuisine. In any one night, all of these restaurants are crowded, and alcoholic beverages are served until just after midnight.

My consulting was with the IT giant ITCO, for whose expat president there were only two restaurants: – the Italian/Mediterranean TELGOS or the French fish restaurant ZINF. Arriving at TELGOS, you cannot help but notice all of the luxury cars parked in front of the hotel: – a Maserati, two Porches, and a few BMWs. ITCO's president arrived just as I approached the entrance to the hotel. He was greeted by the parking valet staff, all dressed in brown and gold colored jackets, and he handed them his car keys. ITCO's president approached me and pointed to a Lamborghini parked right in front of the hotel entrance belonging to one of ITCO's UAE owners. He mentioned that he had picked out the car for the owner himself. The hotel had a rounded central area with flute-carved pillars surrounding it. The floor was made of dark brown marble, curved to perfection around the pillars. The reflection of the lighting on the floor gives you a unique feeling of comfort. The busy entrance elicits a business-like, entertaining environment.

We headed to the TELGOS restaurant where well-dressed hostesses wearing chic black dresses and high heels greeted us at the entrance. The president, Viken⁶,

⁶ Because UAE residents are embedded in structures of power that are often beyond their immediate control, I have been careful to mask names of individuals and company names.

asked a hostess whether he was getting his usual table, and we were escorted to the centre of the restaurant. Personally, I did not like the table's location, but I soon realized that it was a table where everyone in the restaurant could see you, and where you could engage in short conversations with other surrounding tables. Fadi, the vice president, joined us after ten minutes, and discussion started regarding the identity of those seated at the other tables. Fadi told stories about some of the people sitting around us and the kind of projects they were involved in. He mentioned that, for the past month or so, ITCO had won every project instead of Michelle, the CEO of one of ITCO's competitors.

Fadi ordered an entrée and a pasta dish. I wanted to get the same pasta dish as Fadi's, but then Viken interrupted my ordering and insisted that I choose a special dish that had been named after him: – the 'Viken dish'. Not having much of an option, and not wanting to upset Viken, I ordered 'Viken's dish'. A few minutes later, the restaurant's chef came to greet Viken at our table. It was clear that we received better treatment from the restaurant staff when in Viken's company. Having been there a number other times, I knew that one usually received 'normal' treatment at TELGOS, like in any other restaurant. It seemed obvious that the waiters understood and delivered what their best customers expected: –exclusive service and chef's visits to the select tables.

To my surprise, discussions of ITCO's projects only took a few minutes. Fadi commented on what issues he was facing with the other vice presidents. Viken did not comment, but took notes. The conversation turned immediately to a large prospect, and Viken asserted that the focus needed to be on the decision makers of that project. Viken did not pay much attention to the discussions between Fadi and me concerning the projects and the issues faced.

Fadi noticed a senior UAE official entering the restaurant, and Viken turned his head to view this individual. He stood up and headed towards him, greeting him and exchanging a few smiles. Back at the table, he told us that this person was the advisor of the Minister of Education with whom he had a very close relationship.

The food was served. 'Viken's Dish' consisted of a small portion of sirloin meat and a side salad. Fadi's dish looked much more inviting, served in a large plate with grilled duck pieces on the side, and with sauce and herbs. Viken explained that he had asked the chef for a very tender cut of meat, medium-well done with

special herbs and the spices of his choice. The meat dish also came with a potato puree and some salad with grated cheese. The meat was very good, – tender and tasty. People entering the restaurant approached the table, stopped and greeted either Viken or Fadi. We ended the dinner with pastries and coffee. The chef returned to ask Viken about the dinner, and there was a cordial exchange of thank-you(s) and discussion of how to improve on Viken’s dish. Viken looked around to see who was still at the restaurant and decided to leave.

Doing business in Abu Dhabi seemed much more personal than in Europe or America. I met with my client’s (ITCO) vice president of sales and the president much more often than with others. Viken and Fadi were considered the main decision makers, setting the strategy, giving leadership, and having the necessary relationships with a vast number of influential UAE nationals needed to win contracts.

On several occasions, while discussing ITCO’s current situation, Fadi insisted on Viken speaking directly to key decision makers on some sales proposal that he or his team were working on. These sales proposals would usually be more than \$30M USD in value, and only one or two key decision makers at the customer’s organization would be entitled to decide on which company would be awarded the contract. Viken maintained high-level contacts with UAE nationals in key government positions. During one of these meetings, he received a phone call from what seemed to be a key influential person related to a major project or contract. Viken left his room and headed down to meet that individual in his car. Fadi mentioned that the person Viken was meeting in his car was a close relative of the key decision maker in one of the largest deals or contracts ITCO was working on. Fadi commented that *“The customer wanted to award the contract to ITCO and, hence, wanted to make sure we followed a specific process and pricing so that it would be easier for the key decision maker to get it done.”*

After thirty minutes, Viken returned to his office. He mentioned to Fadi that the deal was done. *“ITCO will be called to negotiate and we should stick to \$50M price to win the deal.”* Fadi mentioned that this contract was of utmost importance, as ITCO needed new projects and this project could last for over three years, and had the potential to bring in a lot of money. Viken gave some instructions to Fadi. Fadi left the room for some time, and I continued the discussions on existing projects. Viken explained how important this contract

was for ITCO and its future. Viken's body language was different; he seemed happy and content. He started writing emails on his laptop. He ignored our project discussion. He received a few telephone calls and waited until Fadi was back. Fadi returned and insisted on Viken making sure that this \$50M USD sales proposal did not slip away, and that he would reaffirm with the key decision maker, again, as part of the final process for winning the deal.

This incident reminded me of a similar case I had been involved in a few years before, when I was asked by the president of ITCO to meet the UAE owner and explain the importance of a sales proposal that Oracle was working on. I was called on my mobile phone to meet the UAE owner in his car, which was parked in front of ITCO's offices. I entered the car. It was my first meeting with the UAE owner. The car was a white Mercedes Benz. Its interior had tinted windows. It had leather seats; glossy wood covered the front dashboard. There were three telephones between the front seats. After greetings, the president immediately asked me to shut-off my phone and remove its battery. He stated that doing so was the only way to maintain privacy and to keep people from being able to tap into the phones. We discussed the sales project in question, and I identified the stakeholders and decision makers that we needed to convince in order to win the sales proposal. The UAE owner spoke very little. He explained that he knew a few people that could help, and that later in the week he would send me a note. In fact, in less than twenty-four hours, he sent a message to the president for me, instructing me to go and meet a person that was identified as someone that could help with this sales contract. I still remember the smell of the Mercedes's car seats and a very strong spiced-perfume in the air. I spoke rapidly, and the whole meeting took less than five minutes.

Several years later, I met the same UAE owner again in Viken's office. Viken explained that they were working on several consulting initiatives but did not explain anything more. Once again, I noticed that the UAE owner did not speak much. He listened to what Viken said, and looked at me as if afraid of something. I asked Viken why the UAE owner looked so surprised, and Viken answered, "*He is always like that; he is not friendly with people until he gets to know them very, very well.*" I chimed in: "*But he seems to like you?*" and Viken explained that it had taken him many years to get the UAE owner to trust him. Viken explained that he only meets with Joe in Finance and himself when he comes to ITCO, and he usually sends a message early in the morning on those

days that he is coming in the afternoon, at no specific time. Viken mentioned that the UAE owner was a key government statesman, very close to ruling family members.

As a consultant I am not really into such high politics. I may get a glimpse of it once and a while, but my world is much closer to that of operations. I believe that ultimately I am paid to render the invisible aspects of organizations more malleable. I try to see organizations as wholes, as living systems. When I 'meet' an organization, I encounter its people, themes, and the patterns that are formed and being formed from daily interactions. When I describe this in a report (often using metaphors and analogies), I am trying to deal with the tacit. But this is an almost impossible task, as the tacit can only be partially experienced. When you present the organization with what you have seen and experienced, and you are told you are missing the point, you are often confronting the shadow part of the organization that resists change and denies awareness.

Of course change is not always positive. No-one can really control change processes and, hence, negative outcomes are always a possibility. The notion of change, and how could people could adapt faster to realities, and move on in their lives, remains a goal in my interactions. I have spent relentless hours searching for books in this domain. But have had to conclude through often bitter disappointment that the 'how to' books really do belong to 'Heathrow management theory' (Burrell, 1989) and may be a 'good read' on an airplane but are far too simple, prescriptive and linear to capture the workings of systems and change, motivation and resistance, or indeterminacy and the human will.

I have been delivering consulting services, now, for the past eight years. My main focus has been to re-structure organizations, set up new companies, and devise performance management systems. In most cases, if not all, my work had to do with people from all parts of an organization. The activities I undertook cover: developing strategy, addressing financial issues, creating policies and procedures, monitoring performance, re-structuring and even managing a company until someone is recruited to take over.

During my early working years at Oracle, I became intrigued by the concepts of change and entrepreneurship. I had spent over ten years studying change management in the so-called context of the knowledge economy. My focal

interest was in complexity sciences and complex adaptive systems (CAS) theory. In the last five years, I have lived and worked in Canada as well as in the Middle East. I have worked with large Canadian organizations in change management programmes related to IT systems.

The dominant approach to change management and innovation is very top-down and focused on implementing and enforcing performance measurements. It really denies the lessons of systems thinking. While I want to take a whole systems or living systems approach to organizational change and development, the thinking is all around a ‘designer’ outside of the system, who is in control and fixes things. I felt a kind of stagnation and felt that I needed new inspiration. And that was the starting point for this research. My objectives at the start were:

- To engage in and experience a complexity approach in response to ‘stuckness’ in an organization in Abu Dhabi. To understand how actors justify their roles in such contested situations, while gaining the ability to account for my own practices and contributions.
- To make a contribution to ways of thinking and talking about transformation in organizations in the Middle East.

Context: Social Studies

This book did not become an autoethnography. In autoethnography the researcher considers him or herself to be an experiential expert about the subject under study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Thus, the woman who has lost her partner studies mourning, the man with a history of psychosis studies mental health, the woman who has had breast cancer studies the effects of that condition; etc. The assumption is that prior experience helps the researcher to know what questions to ask and to relate empathetically to the theme. Traditional positivist social science supposedly lacks relatedness and reproduces alienation. Interviewees are reduced to objects by the researcher, whereby phenomena are falsified and denied. But what was I an expert in? Taking ‘stuckness’ as an autoethnographic starting point would have led to tautology. If I assume that ‘stuckness’ is crucial to Abu Dhabi organizations (or even more extreme, to organizations in the Middle East) then I have narrowly thematized my research and can rightly be

charged with putting words into my interviewees' mouths and having prejudged the meanings of my observations. Thus I had to back off and give more room to observation and description.

My access to one organization had been exemplary. I had implemented interventions, written reports and invited others to do training where I had observed and evaluated the results. I had participant observation data, interviews and email records of events. I had the trainer's observations and self-evaluations. Thus I had the material needed to write an ethnography of the one organization, which I have called 'ITCO'. And ITCO provided a story: from boom to bust. Tremendous growth was halted when the economic crisis struck it in 2010, and ITCO shrunk back down to almost nothing. Thus there was drama, but had the major players changed, adapted or reanalyzed? I could try to find out.

So I decided to write an ethnographic case history. I call the effort ethnography because my goal is to understand the subject's beliefs and social order. How did the players see themselves and others? How did they experience and understand their situation and actions? I seek the outsider's position. I want to understand their beliefs and actions and/or non-action. And I want to reserve the dialogue between my beliefs and ethics and what happened at ITCO for Chapter 4.

Thus, I have not formulated a working hypothesis or a research plan setting out interventions or methods of gathering data. On the contrary, I have used the opportunities I had in my daily work and in ordinary meetings with colleagues and clients, to partake in many differing conversations. During these conversations or just after, I have taken note of what was said and what I experienced as striking moments. Since I am studying processes of living relationships, I have tried to write from what John Shotter(1993) calls writing from within the 'living moments' or 'witness-writing', rather than 'aboutness-writing'.

I have adopted a non-linear approach as I write. As I engage in conversations, conduct my consulting activities, read and discuss with others, I reflect on many issues by asking myself questions such as: 'What is assumed here?' or 'What was intended by the actors to happen?' Ultimately, this is a study in social ontology. What do the players in ITCO assume about social existence; about the being of the one person to the other? In Chapter 2 the ordering principle is historical

and not conceptual. An attempt will be made tell the story of the growth and fall of ITCO.

Whether a researcher or anthropologist is conducting a study of New Guinea Highlanders or managers in an organizational setting, the cornerstone of such research is ethnography or the descriptions of a culture through its own emic gaze or experience. A detailed ethnography of ITCO aims to understand the practices of ITCO's executives, managers and owners. To change and develop, an organization has to be self-aware, which calls for investigation that very much resembles ethnography, though more for pragmatic than critical or intellectual ends. ITCO's crises in growing revenue and profitability demanded analysis. Given the complexities of both the context and object, I needed to be embedded within the organization to closely observe managers and executives.

The study of a culture like ITCO requires a certain level of intimacy with group members that develops overtime by working as an active participant with them. The main motivation for adopting the ethnographic approach was the conviction that only through living, interacting with, and experiencing ITCO's actors, in their own environment could I really understand their way of life. I needed to explore details of the phenomena that are often difficult to convey using quantitative methods. I was inspired by Bourdieu's approach to ethnography through open-minded participant observation⁷. He argues that the researcher needs to be part of the research, and close to all the participants, to be able to understand the 'logic of practice'. Knowledge is a product of lived experiences within a set of social conditions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Understanding the habitus of the participants refers to the meanings and practices (re)produced and altered through their interactions. Practices are shaped by the tacit nature of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990a) embodied by the actors during their performance; we cannot realistically expect to uncover these practices through interviews alone (Bourdieu, 1998). Ethnographic study extends over long periods of time, allowing the researcher to note the smallest and seemingly insignificant goings-on.

My fieldwork, as a consultant, focused on the managers and executives at ITCO. Through attending management meetings, conducting workshops, meeting

⁷ Participant observation usually means for researchers to get to know the *emic* characteristics of participants and grasp a better understanding of the social milieu (Bernard, 2006).

customers, interacting via emails, and visiting the UAE, I built up a picture of the socialization of ITCO's managers and executives. My consulting engagements and workshops at ITCO focused on their internal and external interactions. The materials of the research were drawn from several sources: daily participation in ITCO's operations and meetings, historical documents, and several attempted change initiatives over a four-year period.

I have tried to examine the patterns in the dynamics of interaction, looking at the participants' social identity, their habitus, and the development of their social capital. I have tried to attend to both the actions people took and the structural constraints upon their action. Bourdieu (1988a) and Llewellyn (1993) both argue that stories, narratives and accounts can be usefully incorporated into the ethnographic search for meaning, in order to provide not just "an analysis of the experience of social agents, but also an analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible" (Bourdieu, 1988a, p. 780). Taking into consideration the complexity of hypermodernity in the UAE's social setting, context here is crucial.

When I began this research, I wasn't an ethnographer. I was a consultant. As I worked with ITCO, I became an ethnographer-consultant by doing the things that ethnographers do. I learned how to listen, to ask questions, to observe, to watch, and to document the moments of everyday practice, in order to understand what underpinned the social construction of the organizational reality. My research is centered on the conviction that accounts of social life should incorporate the actors' frame of reference, where reality is not seen as an objective entity but is socially constructed to be explored and interpreted (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As a consultant, I was allowed access ITCO I thought on the assumption that my involvement would add value to the organization. I was asked to provide recommendations for actions based on my findings.

In the ethnography, I am part of the events as they unfold. I use the first person 'I' because I was there. I was contracted as a consultant I believed to help restructure ITCO and incorporate new practices and knowledge to make it more effective. I was also a researcher. I was not only observing the environment, I was participating in it, and thus I present myself actively in the research. I try to capture the multiple voices of the field and I pay attention to what people say and to what they actually do (Bourdieu, 1977). I do not just observe the front-

stage surface performances, but I try to uncover some of the tacit and taken for granted assumptions that are behind the scenes.

In autoethnography, one's own experience becomes the topic of investigation. It requires self-questioning and confronting things that are less than flattering about oneself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography communicates a subjective knowing from within experience (Shotter, 1993). Bochner and Ellis point to the risks of unconsciously becoming self-centered, tending to occupy an overly important place in the discourse. Bochner and Ellis's concern is relevant to my writing, as I must not let it appear that I am the subject of this research. I need to stay centered on the goal of observing and describing ITCO.

I have tried to shape the discourse within ITCO and its discourse has shaped me. This positions my experiences; I am linked to the collective enterprise of the social agents within the field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). But I failed to change ITCO and (as will become clear) I could never really accept ITCO's dominant discourse. I started the research thinking that as a consultant I could 'help' ITCO. It was as if I assumed that business studies (considering, I have an MBA) had provided me with some secret guide to success. It was not until I engaged with the field and context that I recognized the 'false transcendence' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) of those assumptions.

During the course of the research, I had to ask myself, in several instances, questions such as: 'Who am I?' and 'Who do I want to be?' This has led me to a dynamic negotiation in creating a sense of 'Self' in relation to the research framework, analysis and representation. More specifically, it has been through my own reconfiguration of my self-identity that I have come to understand the tensions encountered through my experience with ITCO. I view these tensions as positive, creating a bridge that informed the theoretical perspective, research strategy and interpretation of my research. As the research continued, I experienced several transformational or 'ah-ha' moments, which have changed the way I look at things. Confrontation with hyper-capitalism is (and was) shocking.

Did I do action research? I wanted, via researching ITCO, to achieve change. But there was no common coherent sharing of a diagnosis or joint change agenda. I was not able to work in cycles of 'diagnosis: dialogue: implementation: evaluation.' Ethnography does not normally consider joint action for change

between researchers and practitioners as a source of knowledge. The ethnographer usually does not participate in efforts for change. Action research demands co-research and active researcher-researched cooperation. This did not happen. Consultants normally do not do action research because it deconstructs their leverage. Consulting operates in a model of a consultant who 'knows that he (she) knows' and a client that 'knows that he (she) should learn from the consultant'. Action research aims for equality, which ends consultancy.

“Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162).

My initial interest in action research was based on the possibility of engagement by all participants in the research and the commitment it requires. Thus I might have found action research attractive, but it was never a realistic option in ITCO or I believe within hyper-capitalism.

Ultimately, as Cooper and Burrell (1988, p. 106) phrase it, “to understand organizations it is necessary to analyze them from the outside, as it were, and not from what is already organized. It becomes a question of analyzing, let us say, the production of organization rather than the organization of production.” Similarly, Chia (1996) claims that, organizations are consequences from the effects of a particular discursive production process at that moment in time.

Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) argues for a 'reflexive sociology'. I accept that Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity is important while developing an understanding of the problems studied. Reflexivity for me requires vigilance throughout the processes of analysis, thinking, and writing. Bourdieu's reflexivity involved a turning back upon the position of the knowing subject, a looking back at one's own knowing practices; for me, that means I must look back at how I was embedded in my social position, as well as my method of analysis. Reflexivity involves a looking back at one's own biases, practices, and taken-for-granted points of view, to “question the suppositions inherent in the position of an outside observer who, in his preoccupation with interpreting practices, is inclined to introduce into the object the principles of his relations to the object” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 2)(see Figure 5). For me, this

means sharing practical experiences with the researched subjects and practitioners, and living through the spatiality and temporality of their embodied conditions. Through these means, I have hoped to come to understand ITCO's mechanisms of social reproduction, including the structures, habitus, field of play, and actions.

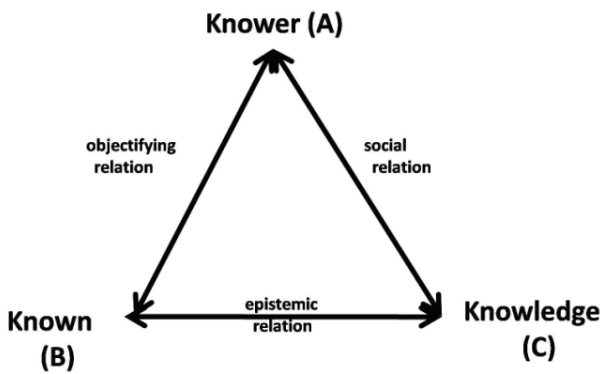


Figure 5. Bourdieu's Reflexivity (Maton, 2003).

Thus, I have chosen *qua* epistemology for a fairly traditional concept of social studies. I do emphasize reflexivity, but as a critical tool to better controlling the rigor of observation. My ethnography needs to be acceptable to the reader as documentation of what happened 'then and there'. The researcher will try to stay as neutral as he can to let the story emerge as far as possible on its own terms. I will try to let ITCO talk to you. Of course I know that this is a ventriloquist's trick and that ITCO cannot, as such, talk. But I can try to achieve the traditional sign of ethnographic success; i.e. the reader believes that I have really been there and that the reader feels that he/she knows on some crucial points what it was like. I will try to keep my theorizing, reflections and questioning in reserve thereby making Chapter 2 as descriptive as possible.

CHAPTER 2

The Case: ITCO

This is a case history. I have announced that this is a book about scarcity and excess. Business is all about scarcity – i.e. fulfilling the needs and demands of populations and customers. Success in business is all about excess or the value-added above raw material and labor costs that accrues to managers and owners. What has shocked, troubled and fascinated me is that in ITCO there seemed to be excess without scarcity. ITCO seemed to flourish without really producing products and services to meet market demand. There was demand all right, ITCO signed contracts and promised to deliver IT solutions, but did not seem to deliver what it promised either to its customers or investor(s). This should spell disaster and it did not. ITCO was a mystery to me. How could it exist as it did? At first I thought it should definitely be remade into a ‘normal’ successful firm. But I discovered slowly that no such thing was going to happen. Thus in this chapter I describe as best I can how ITCO was, how ITCO did (not) change (despite my attempted introduction of change agents) and how the economy of excess lead to excesses I more abhor than I can praise.

ITCO 2004: Where, When, What

ITCO is not a real name, but it is a very real place. A few details of its existence have been disguised to protect confidentiality, but the overall image of the people and the life of the organization are true.

I frequently travelled across the Atlantic to reach my consulting destination in ITCO, in Abu Dhabi. Usually I would meet the vice presidents and president at the start of every visit. I was usually booked in at a nearby hotel; jet lag keeping me awake until early morning. Nonetheless, early morning meetings would get me going, as I tried to understand ITCO's problems. When I began working with ITCO, the vice president's main concern was with the projects. Management felt that it could not successfully control what was happening with project implementation at their customer sites. This made it near impossible to find ways to make the projects profitable. The meetings with the vice president of sales started with highly optimistic stories about hundred-million dollar projects, won in the last months, and how ITCO would keep on growing. The vice president would talk about his recent visits to Europe and elsewhere in the Gulf region. He would speak of the vast potential in other countries like Iraq and Iran. I would caution him that the risks in such volatile places are very high, and that ITCO knows little about how things get done in those countries. The vice president would laugh and re-assure me (and himself) that there was nothing that could not be cracked by ITCO's collective knowhow in IT. During these meetings, there would always be interruptions from sales managers or project managers, popping into the vice president's office to report a problem such as issues with products and project delivery.

ITCO's main offices are in Abu Dhabi, and it has partner offices in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. ITCO depends on loans and credit facilities from local and international banks to operate. In presentations by the president of ITCO to foreign companies he has stated:

"ITCO was founded in 1979 and operates as a single firm with branches in different cities in the UAE and the Persian Gulf region. It has grown to become a major IT provider of hardware products from global players like HP, IBM, Erikson, and others. The company has several divisions, Oracle implementation services, retail outlets, and maintenance and support services. ITCO had a turnover of approximately US\$1 billion in 2007, and over 600 employees operating throughout its offices."

ITCO (in 2004) was a self-contained IT services company that sold and implemented solutions and products. It was partly a retail company and at the same time, a project implementer, delivering people and hardware-based 'solutions' to customers. Customers either bought directly from ITCO or chose

to publish a Request for Proposal (RFP) for needed products and services that ITCO could bid for. Once a deal is made, customers are supposed to get the solution that meets their needs. Selling and implementing projects is what ITCO's president and vice presidents spend most of their time doing. Most customers base their purchasing decisions on price. Competition is mainly determined by price but purchases are also determined by relationships. This is an almost all-male world – of ITCO's consultants, 95 percent are male. Few female consultants are allowed to enter the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Kuwait. Often, they have to be accompanied by their husbands and have a very unique specialization or field of expertise to get in.

ITCO's primary assets, as an IT products and services organization, are the educated professionals under contract to it, whose outputs are intangible services grounded in complex knowledge. ITCO's reputation is related to its size and power, and much less to the quality of its services and personnel. Many managers I talked to said that they were attracted to ITCO, as opposed to other major firms, because of ITCO's high brand recognition in major UAE markets. Employees see value in belonging to a powerful company as it facilitates meeting revenue targets faster. Employees see a good brand name as a means to better compensation and/or a better job. Both employees and clients view ITCO as a leading provider of products and services, with a core business of selling a varied range of brand products from major Western IT vendors.

Most of ITCO's consultants work at customer sites all over the Persian Gulf region: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. For the majority of employees, working for ITCO means emigrating from their country of origin to the UAE. Working in ITCO entails entering a small but intense world of interaction. ITCO has a 'thick' organizational culture. ITCO's early growth was characterized by a culture of 'winning', with strong continuity in the executive group. Both employees and customers view ITCO as an IT solution and service provider with an outstanding after-sales support organization. The core business included the selling of branded products. Selling hardware was the firm's core business since its founding; early projects were based on selling the hardware first and making them operational as part of a solution later. The success jargon centered on: 'winning a large deal', 'selling thousands laptops', 'acquiring a new product license' and having a 'competitive lead due to a new product launch'.

ITCO's larger customers come from the government and semi-government sectors, such as telecommunications, and the oil and gas companies. Most of these companies are managed by expatriates just like in ITCO. The government and semi-government organizations are managed by locals or UAE nationals.

ITCO has several offices in Abu Dhabi. There is the corporate office consisting of six floors, with a large retail store featuring the latest IT gadgets and phones from Erikson and other well-known brands on the ground floor. Executives, sales managers, and administration staff operate from the corporate office. The services and project offices are at a different location and are less modern. As you enter the services and projects offices, you see posters hanging on the walls (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. An office picture at ITCO, 2006.

("When a collection of brilliant minds, hearts, and talent come together, expect a masterpiece")

The pictures have proverbs written under them, such as: "C H A N G E; *If you're not riding the wave of change you'll find yourself beneath it.*" ITCO's mission statement was: "*Rely on our solutions to achieve sustainability and growth; our success depends on the success of the clients and communities we serve in creating and sharing wealth.*" This is mirrored in the vice president of sales, statements: "*ITCO is one of a few firms that grew enormously during the period of 2003 to 2009 by expanding into every possible IT product in the UAE and the Persian Gulf region. It dominates the IT market in the UAE by winning major projects and rapidly expanding with new products.*" And by selling Erikson smart phones it

had enhanced its image among the local UAE officials and members of the ruling family. As he saw it, ITCO's business model centered on selling IT products and services at low margins. Since contracts depended on price, this was the way to insure that the revenue levels would grow.

I insisted to Fadi that usually, when solutions are embedded into products, margins should be much higher. He claimed that competition was fierce and that ITCO's strategy was to maintain and gain market share, and hence margins were lower than the standards. Whether this was the best strategy to follow, Fadi was unsure, but since ITCO was growing, he assumed that it must be doing the right things. He explained that revenues originated mainly from large projects, and amounted to hundreds of millions yearly. Its telecommunications products division was a cash-type of business that brought in millions of dollars daily. This counter balanced the late collections from larger projects, whose implementation and cash collection usually extended to months and years.

Every manager and executive I met agreed that the main factor contributing to ITCO's capability to sell and win projects was its senior managers⁸ strong relationships with local UAE managers in large governmental institutions. Projects mostly started at 30M USD each, and could even amount to over 100M USD per quarter. Risks on these projects were high, and if payments were delayed, the company could suffer losses. The amount of risk tended to be in a linear relationship to the size of the customer. It is highly predictable, for example, that in economic downturns, companies with larger projects will suffer most, therefore the larger a company's revenues from large projects the greater the exposure, and hence the higher the risks.

Fadi was normally my first 'port of call' when I arrived in Abu Dhabi. He provided me with the current lowdown on the business. But then, I had to go to HR. Jan is ITCO's Human Resources and Administration (HRA) manager. Contacting the HRA manager is a must in any organization in the UAE. They hold your passport, take care of your visa, and arrange for your stay and transportation. The HRA in my case was also the project manager handling all change management initiatives. So she was a key contact for me and my work.

⁸ 'Senior managers' or 'executives' refer to the vice presidents and president of ITCO. 'Managers' refer to directors, sales managers, administration managers and project managers.

Jan had been five years in ITCO and was one of the most efficient employees I have ever worked with. She knew all the loopholes and ways to get things done. She was highly respected by both managers and consultants. Everyone felt comfortable communicating rumors and what happened informally inside ITCO to her, as well. She supported me in my desire to bring change to ITCO. Her explanation of who is who in ITCO:

“Early in 2004, the demand for implementation consulting staff grew at a very high rate, starting a trend of freelance consulting. Consultants and project managers came from all over the world to the UAE. Consultants started to demand higher salaries and began to be represented by agents. Agents negotiated on behalf of the consultants and had many vacancy positions and alternatives; consultants could be easily deployed in any part of the world. Agents sought to place consultants for shorter periods of time to maximize their possibility of raising their fees. In some cases, consultants demanded more than \$3,000 USD per day for their services. Having mainly been involved in delivery, integration of systems, and consulting, the management team was inexperienced in solutions delivery and more experienced in selling products. ITCO experienced many issues as a result of these factors and changes in the economic context: projects got delayed as it was difficult to recruit the right consultants on time; profitability plummeted on many projects; long-term consultants started leaving as they sought higher compensation and employees felt that the management team was biased towards some employees; and in many instances, management refused to be accountable for failures. By the end of 2005, ITCO started experiencing losses in projects; however, senior management was too busy selling and failed to find solutions to the company’s problems.”

ITCO’s executives portray the company as the largest IT supplier in the UAE and make efforts on every occasion and through marketing initiatives to maintain this image. The belief of the executives was that local government entities buy from the largest supplier, and that winning projects is easier if you are bigger. Competition comes from other IT companies. Rival sales managers often met each other when requests for proposals (RFPs) were opened at the purchasing departments of the procuring institution. The rivalry was not personal. Visits to larger customers were made by senior management. Participation in sponsoring government and expense-account entertainment were also part of the effort to strengthen ITCO’s relationships with large businesses.

From an organizational perspective, ITCO operated at three different levels. On the first level: the consultants and staff took care of customers and the functional aspects of projects. In a project, the consultants took the role of implementation experts. In this role, the consultant’s task was to manage a project at a customer site. The sales person had a primary role before the project was agreed upon with the customer. On the second level: ITCO’s managers oversaw many projects simultaneously and provided on-line project management. Here, the manager’s role was akin to an orchestra conductor or executive chef – that is, to provide on-line leadership and direction to the consulting team and to prioritize what needed to be done next, and by whom. ITCO’s offices were relatively small, but every manager had a separate office. Managers did not like to sit in open space cubicles. Earning a manager’s title meant getting an office with a separate door. This work seemed to be somewhat conflictual – as you passed by the offices, you heard arguments going on, either on the phone or with more people in the office. On the third level: the executives provided off-line leadership and management. The task here was to manage the organization and design the sales and project processes.

The structure consisted of: (1) a president and four vice presidents, (2) a few directors of operations, who managed sales and delivery; sales managers responsible for revenue generation; operations and project managers responsible for the delivery and implementation of solutions and systems including ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) such as financial, distribution, and HRMS (see Figure 7). ITCO also had a few staff functions such as the HR and administration manager, a chief accountant. And, of course, (3) there were the consultants and the support staff for delivering the after-sales services.

EXECUTIVES	president, vice presidents
MANAGERS	directors, project managers, sales managers, administration manager, service delivery manager, finance manager, human resources manager
STAFF	consultants, others

Figure 7. ITCO’s organizational structure.

Sixty percent of the six hundred plus employees were engineers who were the consultants providing and implementing solutions at customer sites. ITCO's primary asset, as an IT services organization, was the educated professionals whose outputs were intangible services, encoded with complex knowledge. At the organizational level, ITCO was steered by normatively sanctioned expectations. These included expectations of professional independence, client confidentiality, and operating with integrity. ITCO had invested in organizational controls to secure compliant behavior. These operated through incentives and investment in personnel, via training, workshops, and developing the firm's knowledge infrastructure. During the past decade, many service organizations have found themselves at the centre of scandals, specifically in accountancy, law, and IT consultancy. IT consultancy firms, much like ITCO, have violated the expectations of operating with integrity by exploiting every sales opportunity to increase revenues, disregarding accountability and losses as long as targets were met. ITCO has not been hit by a major scandal, but sometimes you wonder if that was not more good luck or the uncritical attitude of the business environment than thanks to its own merits. ITCO's reputation is related to its size and power, and much less the quality of its services and personnel. Employees see value in belonging to a powerful company as it facilitates meeting revenue targets faster and more efficiently.

ITCO buys its products from several multinational vendors, such as Oracle, Lenovo, Erikson, and many others. These vendors employ almost the same organizational structures as ITCO. Managers have the responsibility of overseeing project profitability, arranging for resources, long-term business planning, and collection. At ITCO managers mainly engage with customers and spend much of their day at project sites, meeting consultants and customer representatives. They were directly responsible for project plans and project profitability. All executives and managers at ITCO came from outside of the UAE. For several years, the majority came from Lebanon, Egypt, and India. The key administrative and senior management positions were held by Lebanese. The majority of the consultants and managers came from Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, and the technical and solution managers came from India.

From Jan I knew that ITCO's projects were late and profitability had always been a problem, it seemed almost impossible to grow profits. Jan's perspective:

“It seems to me that consultants and managers nowadays are travelling in a train, collecting higher salaries at every stop. Nobody cares; all they really care about is the money, their salary. If we are late in paying one day they complain. All have high salaries. And from time to time they threaten to leave the company if we do not comply with their demands...”

If a project loses money, they do not care to find solutions to the problems, they blame the customer or senior management, and keep on draining the project resources until they leave, and someone else comes in, and re-does the whole project. People do not care. The current management thinks that if we enhance our effectiveness in governing the projects, the project manager can reduce the risks and we can resolve these issues.”

Jan thought that change needed to be brought very fast to ITCO. She had never attained a senior position during her career, but she claimed to be happy in her staff role and wanted to prove that she could help to bring change. I learned from her, to my surprise, that ITCO did not have an employee assessment method in place, so recruitment and promotions were decided by managers on a ‘wasta’ or favoritism basis. ‘Wasta’ is a colloquial word that is used to indicate a close and reciprocal relationship between individuals, hence providing preferential treatment or service.

Jan claimed that to work in ITCO was to interact with people whose talk about their daily practices only conveyed a sense of wanting to finish today, and wait for tomorrow:

“Managers tackle their work with their future in mind, trying to get through the day’s work with as little anxiety as possible. Managers’ daily work is concerned with the subtleties of customers demanding new technology as the UAE sees hyper growth in every industry. ITCO had grown very fast over the past 10 years. Before the boom of 2000 to 2002, the company had a small-company atmosphere. People tended to feel as though they knew one another; they communicated on a personal level and with much fewer formal procedures. With its fast growth, all this started to change. Attitudes changed. One salesman told me few months back, that he gets a feeling of insignificance nowadays when he closes a relatively large deal. In the past any deal would be celebrated and you could feel everyone was happy. Nowadays only very large deals get attention and even then there is no celebrating.”

Managers at ITCO have professional experience in systems design, programming and systems implementation. They have moved around from one company to another in the UAE. They knew their way about. Managers, through their social interactions, knew ITCO's specific routines and practices, which were not all that different, anyway, from what they would experience elsewhere. Managers mostly comply with company rules; they have learned to stay away from executives when margins are low or profits do not look promising. This tacit knowledge had been learned previously and was easily adapted to ITCO.

ITCO's projects consist of multimillion dollar projects in IT implementation. The majority of managers made their money through sales commissions. Executives, on the other hand, were entitled to a percentage on the company's end-of-year profits. The national owner or UAE local owned 100% of ITCO. Not being involved in the day-to-day operations of ITCO, its UAE owner was legitimately able to engage in a wide range of activities, sometimes in direct competition with ITCO. The owner was not interested in managing the assets he owns or setting any strategic direction for his investments. He expected yearly profits from ITCO, but was barely involved. The owner was worth hundreds of millions of dollars and usually felt happy that ITCO made profits. While profits were only in tens of millions, compared to the hundreds of millions in sales, such difference was never questioned by anyone, including the local owner, international auditors or the banks. In fact, he probably earned a lot more through his direct links to the ruling family than from his businesses. ITCO was but one not all too important venture in a portfolio. For rich UAE nationals, entering into any venture that is extravagant and unique, which distinguishes them socially from the rest, is nearly irresistible. A bank director in one of the largest UAE banks, reiterated to me in conversation that the fortunes, especially of those close to the ruling families, are in billions of dollars and that the money was held in local and foreign bank accounts. Socially, the companies are important; even the ruling sheikhs own companies and ventures that are usually registered in the names of other nationals close to them.

For me ITCO was a difficult puzzle. From the perspective of 2004-2005, what most urgently needed changing? Was ITCO adapting or was there too much inertia? What disrupted or influenced change at ITCO? Could change be managed at ITCO? Would increased effectiveness bring what executives at ITCO expected? While executives emphasized increasing effectiveness, it was

not clear how and what efforts were really in place to reach higher profits. Evidently ITCO had grown its revenues from a few million dollars per year in 1998 to almost one billion dollars in a period of less than ten years, and everyone felt quite happy about it.

After all they were getting what they wanted; making money quickly. Managers saw how fast someone else had accumulated wealth. Many experienced corruption as part of their daily transactions in trying to complete documents or in sales transactions. As a result, many felt that deviance and corruption were sanctioned. For these managers, it was considered a very shameful event when someone was caught and brought to justice. And, in such circumstances any justice is mostly politically driven by the UAE nationals, trying to hide the mere fact of the existence of corrupt practices. Accused individuals faced jail for their actions, but are mostly released in a few months, and deported to their country of origin. So, while in the eyes of many, justice was done, the reality of early release and deportation is low profile. Society, friends, and family, generally paint a shameful story of anyone implicated in kickbacks, bribes and theft. Rumors travel to the town or village of the perpetrator's country of origin very fast. Everyone would come to know about the stories and would guess how much the person had gained. But no one would dare to bring these stories into open public discussion.

In 2004-2005 I was filled with optimism about the possibilities of helping ITCO to resolve its problems. I believed that people and organizations should adapt to more effectively deliver value to their stakeholders. And I thought thanks to 25 years of experience that I had what was required to help ITCO change and be more effective. My approach, back then, to change management was drawn from the management literature, and concepts such as Total Quality Management (TQM), sustainability and innovation, Business Process Re-engineering (BPR), and organizational development and learning in organizations. Implementing such change initiatives is very common in most organizations. Organizations assume that these initiatives add new routines and knowledge to their companies, leading to better practices and higher profits.

Discussions with executives from ITCO, Oracle, and local UAE banks revealed that organizational change meant for them 'something' driven through facilitation agents either from within the organization or by outside consultants.

Change required the design of planned managerial actions with support from organizational members. For example, they talked about the ‘corporate culture as a system’ – that is, someone can design and integrate it within the firm. Change occurs simply by ‘telling and listening’. Managers, consciously or unconsciously, talk about achieving a ‘vision’ or even achieving ‘innovation’, by launching a program using a framework with directions and tips. Most of the people I met in ITCO held the belief that the effective manager is one who is ‘in control’ and can predict the distant future, or at least the near future. The UAE national owners and banks expected management to be in control, as it gave them confidence in the leadership of the organization.

But could some sort of planned change initiative help ITCO, and if so, which? Could some sort of change program bring enhanced practices and effective results? After all such change programs really only amount to training. At the end of the day I have to tell ITCO managers something that is going to make them act differently. Can I really be sure they will even listen? Of course they would pretend to, but that wouldn’t get me very far. Of course there are guidelines and books, but they all refer to America and Europe. There’s really nothing known about change management in the UAE. Reengineering, TQM, and numerous other improvement approaches supposedly have worked with great success in some instances, but they can also fail miserably. So how certain could I be with my confidence?

The reality was that executives at ITCO claimed to believe that they had control of ITCO and its operations. The executives believed that change involved processes that would anticipate future difficulties, threats and opportunities. They assumed that change involved a ‘change agent’ who was either internal or external to the organization, was committed to increased organizational effectiveness, and was aware of cultural constraints.

ITCO had never implemented any change management framework or process. Throughout the years, ITCO had carried out small or incremental reorganizations on an annual basis. Year after year, these changes had become institutionalized as part of its culture. My interviews with vice presidents indicated that they saw these changes as a way to match ITCO’s internal structure to that of its vendors or partnered customers.

Change within ITCO had always followed a top-down approach. There would be presentations and email communications for a long period of time. Employees would complain about the changes, mostly informally. The changes were usually decided by the president in direct consultation with the vice presidents. These discussions were mostly done one-on-one and communicated to others in general meetings. No consensus was required. The changes mainly were directed to the operating structure of ITCO, sometimes affecting the senior managers' and executives' positions or authority. The current president had joined ITCO in 1995 and all the vice presidents had been senior managers prior to being promoted to vice presidents, so 'change' really was business-as-usual.

ITCO, beginning 2004, was reorganized into product divisions: ERP (enterprise resource planning), CRM (customer relations management), BI (business intelligence and analytics), DMS (document management systems), Smartphones; and for each product category is subdivided into functional areas and profit centers. The small company atmosphere was gone. The divisions used to be independent and small enough that employees inside them felt as if they were working for a small company. Employees knew one another and could rely on personal contacts to get things done. Formal procedures had begun to dominate. Groups developed within the divisions their subdivisions based on ethnic backgrounds and countries of origin.

At the end of 2004, it was agreed that I would implement change initiatives at ITCO to tackle issues surrounding the projects. I was to focus on: (1) revenue and profits, (2) enhancing effectiveness, and (3) managing finances. Improved effectiveness in practices and profitability was the goal. With the need acknowledged to increase revenues and achieve higher profits, new practices and structures were needed to provide faster project completion to realize higher margins. Multinational companies were entering the market, implementing projects with new tools and practices, reaping huge revenues and profits in short periods of time. ITCO had to catch up.

Not only were there personnel problems caused by the loss of intimacy and the scale of the divisionalized set-up, hyper-capitalism was becoming more pronounced. High growth led managers and consultants to focus on their own benefit without regard for the company. Many were indifferent to relationship-building with executives or managers above them. What relationships there

were, were built with similar others of the same country of origin and/or profession. Executives could not leverage relationships to enact innovation or compliance. And increased competition had created higher employee attrition leading to higher risks, especially in larger projects. ITCO needed solutions to limit attrition and to weld more unity.

At Work in ITCO (2005-2008)

In January 2005, I travelled back to the UAE to start the change initiatives at ITCO. My job as a change manager was to implement change and interact with different stakeholders—ranging from members of the executive team to project managers and employees, regional sales people and ITCO’s vendors—and to provide answers. The change program depended upon the collaborative interaction among informed and committed participants from each of the stakeholders.

The change initiatives included a review of the structure, processes, project methodology, skill sets, practices and social relationships in the organization. My first question was: what does a person have to know to be in ITCO? The answers appeared initially rather simple. You have to know how to get the products, sell the products, implement IT solutions, and collect receivables to secure one’s profit.

I constantly faced the temptation to jump to conclusions, a tendency produced by my familiarity with IT project implementations. I needed to balance observations of behavior with listening to managers and executives talk about their work and issues. I needed to tap into the executives, managers and consultants’ own interpretation of actions, events and situations. I needed to understand ITCO’s practices, and its political, economic and social dynamics, if I was to be effective. How did the key players in ITCO act and create meaning in their daily lives?

I had weekly meetings with the vice presidents of ITCO, and I usually spent an hour or so per week meeting with the president. ITCO’s president is the main producer, innovator and strategist. The president has led ITCO’s growth, pushed the expansion into innovative products, and added offices and retail outlets all

over the UAE. However, he is rarely involved in day-to-day operations. He was keen to follow best-practice operational models and frameworks, and was focused on the designing of the processes that should take place. Strangely enough, more than once, our meetings were interrupted by the vice president of finance wanting to have him sign some papers and complaining about the lack of cash and collections. Another time, the director of administration interrupted to report that some fraudulent activity had happened in one of the retail shops. The president usually got angry at these interruptions. It was common for him to shout and argue. It seemed this was the way things got reported and resolved. My meetings with the president usually left me puzzled. He insisted that he rarely visits project sites, as that is the vice presidents' responsibility, and that his presence could merely complicate matters. He was perfectly aware of the problems at projects, and I used to wonder and ask myself whether he believed a solution to increase profits was even possible.

After meeting with the vice presidents I would turn my attention to meeting the managers and get more details on what was happening at the projects and in sales. Very early on, I decided that sales and project practices were the key components of ITCO's daily work. The sales and projects practices in ITCO displayed stable patterns of behavior, but it was not clear how well they were adapted to their business environment.

In any ordinary day at ITCO, people would either be closing sales deals or reacting to problems faced in project implementation. Selling products and increasing sales revenues is normal enough. At ITCO, high revenue figures supposedly differentiated them from all the others in the market. Being number one and the largest was an important image, and the story that the UAE national wanted to hear. Elias the director of sales:

“Our objectives are very clear, and the first of these is selling to increase revenues; everything else is of secondary importance. The vice presidents and shareholders think they know it all; they are the leaders in the IT market in the UAE, and since they have grown to become a billion dollar company, they think everything they say is correct.”

ITCO's president:

“ITCO exists because of its relationships in the marketplace and its historical positioning. What is keeping ITCO alive are: (a) the brand-image capital it has gained throughout its many years of operations, (b) the sales objectives of getting deals at any cost, and (c) social relationships, through its political influence and that of the owner. This makes ITCO unique.”

ITCO was focused on sales with little thought about how revenue targets would influence project profitability and whether customer receivables could become a danger to its finances. Managers at ITCO would always defend increasing sales as their growth objective and mission. This applied in particular to the Lebanese executives, who had the highest positions in the company. Historically, they were well known for their astute and innovative managerial skills. Sales growth empowered managers in their roles and practices while shaping corporate ITCO. As the president put it, *“Everybody is a salesman.”*

But significantly enough, most of the managers involved along the chain of command, mentioned that they were not responsible for losses. They claimed that projects are complex and there were too many departments involved, and hence it was difficult to account for who was responsible. While sales revenue grew, ITCO’s accounting problems also increased, even though it engaged world-renowned auditors such as YNE Inc⁹, who in essence were responsible for the accuracy of ITCO’s accounts and financial reporting. In fact, shareholders, sales teams, auditors, and the national local owner were all benefiting from the growth in revenues. It created for everyone a sense of success. Growth in revenues meant, as explained by the Finance Manager, *“New customers, larger projects and beating the competition.”* Profits were reported yearly, and balance sheets and income statements were audited at the end of every fiscal year. The UAE owner, executives and managers collected bonus-pay and their share in profits, at the end of every fiscal year, if the targets were met. With increased sales revenues came increased receivables. How to account for receivables was problematic. Neither auditors nor the management team had proper guidelines on how to account for delays or bad debt. In fact, there was an ‘artificial receivables’ narrative that kept on being displayed in every conversation and discussion, while everyone avoided a decision on what and how to account for those late receivables. To reach the agreed to profits, ITCO had to meet its

⁹ The real name has been changed.

revenue targets, as margins were based on total revenues. Every effort was made to meet revenue targets.

Sales were the responsibility of the sales managers, who performed a diverse set of roles. They called and visited customers, they answer RFPs, they followed up on orders, they interacted with the solution managers, they kept up-to date on their commissions, and they prepared yearly sales presentations detailing how they planned to meet their targets for the fiscal year. The processes of sales can be tracked and measured, and the quality of the outcomes can be judged. Many different quantitative metrics are used to assess how well ITCO, as a sales organization, was performing. One could see ITCO as a system that should be optimized to provide profits for its owners. The goal was to score profits every year. Employee and customer satisfaction was rarely measured or reported. Those factors were more qualitatively assessed through word of mouth. ITCO's sales volume, revenue, and numbers of new customers were measured yearly. These measures were relatively precise; most of the data was easily obtained, and the majority of these measures were considered to be standard metrics.

Prospecting for potential customers and visiting customers are key activities performed by sales managers. Customers are registered in a database and a series of analyses are performed to determine what best products and services to try to sell to them. Once a solution is sold, project managers are allocated to implement the solution with a team of professional consultants. The implementation could last for several months and in some cases a couple of years. Project management is an essential process to monitoring projects and their profitability. Projects are delivered and managed by a services department that uses what has been agreed in the solution proposal to deliver the agreed to products and services within a stipulated period of time.

Personal wins are considered as all important in ITCO, almost always taking priority over any internal commitment or regard for the rules. When managers are asked to explain their actions or inactions, their rationalizations mainly rest on the premise of having to be an achiever who meets his or her targets. Being seen otherwise, opens one to rumor and back-stabbing. When I met with managers in their mini-offices, they would talk in low voices. Even when answering the telephone, there was a sense of secrecy, and I could not normally tell what the phone discussion was about. But it always related to some sales

effort or problems on closing on time. There was a strong sense of individualism. This was exemplified by the employees' daily behaviors as well as by the organizational sales mythology. Many managers said they were attracted to ITCO, as opposed to other major firms, because ITCO paid higher bonuses, provided they met their targets. One manager claimed/joked that, *"If a salesman meets and often exceeds his targets, he gets an open door to see or meet any executive, even the president, any time of day."* "The sales are everything" myth was clearly crucial to ITCO's culture. Management indicated that the only way to succeed was via sales.

Customers often wanted things in areas that require expertise. Because of the high pressure to meet targets, and the fact that maintaining close customer relationships was the only way to make sales, sales managers were reluctant to relinquish control of customers to technical experts. ITCO thereby was perceived by customers as a generalist as opposed to an organization with deep expertise. Due to the individualistic behavior of the sales managers and the lack of executive intervention, a perception developed over time that there were few real decisions being taken by the executives. On several occasions, I observed that new procedures or rules were designed but never followed. In one example, sales managers were requested to validate their solutions in every bid with a project manager. But this was ignored by the sales managers, who said that it was too time-consuming and that the project managers always demanded more products or man-days, making the sale almost impossible. As one sales manager told me, *"If the vice president of sales does not make the decision to impose this process, no one will be blamed in the end for getting it wrong."*

The vice president of sales, Fadi, was a very energetic manager with a vast number of connections. Fadi had dozens of sales people and sales managers reporting to him. Up to ITCO's crisis in 2009, Fadi had the full trust of the president. In fact, ITCO grew (at least in numbers) as a result of Fadi's aggressive sales strategies. During the financial crisis of 2009, however, the trust level between the vice presidents and president diminished, as it emerged that an increasing percentage of sales revenues were associated with higher risks. It turned out that product/service mixes that had been promised caused confusion in the accounting for revenue. Fadi had always insisted that his team did the selling and that the problems arose from other departments, either the projects or services department, or accounting department. But in the end, everyone was

rewarded for selling and doing what they were supposed to do. As long as ITCO recorded profits, managers, auditors, and banks accepted the status quo of inflated profits.

In 2006, because of the exponential growth in sales, a new system for sales reporting was designed and deployed. The system, called FLOW (named by the president, as a system that propagated data and informed all departments), allowed salespeople to enter and access information about their opportunities by registering customer contacts, keeping track of sales closed and profitability. In addition, sales people got compensated only when they entered their opportunities into the system; failing to do so would mean no commission for closing the sale. But, in fact, this was never a policy that was implemented. The system was also meant as a management tool to control, manage, and measure sales revenues and targets throughout the company. The vice presidents and president were to use the system to forecast sales, to reward and discipline sales people, and to assess progress towards meeting sales targets. The vice president of sales used FLOW to prepare performance reports for the president and other vice presidents, who in turn used them to assess the organization's performance and justify and create company policies and strategies. In fact, salespeople's and managers' everyday office experience revolved from then on around FLOW.

Ahmed, at the time was a key informant for me. He was a successful sales manager who managed to sell effectively year after year and exceeded his sales revenue quotas. While I was chatting with Ahmed about FLOW, he mentioned:

.... [laughing] "FLOW is full of garbage; we just register opportunities to make sure we get rewarded at the end. Most of the data is not correct, and it is over inflated; this keeps the vice president and president off your back. It is good to report many opportunities. It is only a problem when you do not win enough sales at the end of the fiscal year and you need to justify the data you have entered. ITCO's fiscal year is normally a full calendar year and hence no quarterly reporting is required. You also need to make sure that you have opportunities equally large as other sales people, because the 'tapping on shoulders' depends on how many opportunities you have in FLOW."

Fadi voluntarily took on demanding sales targets. He aimed hereby to legitimize his success, position, and status within ITCO and the IT field in the UAE.

ITCO's incentive scheme was complex, but ensured that sales people made vast amounts of commission if they met their targets. As described by Ahmed, each sales manager had to present a sales plan at the beginning of every year, when the vice presidents and president decided on the sales manager's targets. Every sales manager had to have a minimum opportunity pipeline in FLOW and had to enter the probability of closing that pipeline. 'Opportunity pipeline' is a sales term used to reflect the amount of potential customers a sales manager has, with details on products, solutions and time required to close the opportunity.

Fadi had been successful every year for the last four consecutive years in meeting and exceeding his targets. Ramez, another sales manager, had mentioned that large deals were usually closed directly by Fadi. Fadi knew that only a few of the dozen sales managers were good in sales. In many cases, Fadi would step in to help sales managers win deals. He wanted to make sure the sales report would not show bad results and lost opportunities. Fadi had gained a legitimate status for his sales operations and meeting sales targets.

Fadi's successes helped everyone from vice presidents to the president to cash-in on large bonuses. Sales managers, such as Ahmed and Ramez, knew that they usually over committed to customers and that a sale's win might have less risk and returns than what the FLOW system portrayed. When confronting Fadi with such cases, he would aggressively justify the failure or low margins as due to the incompetence of the project and service department, which overspent resources, surpassing what was actually budgeted in the FLOW system. No one really engaged in a thorough due diligence of every sales win. The real value of projects and the potential profit was always unclear. While there were project managers responsible for the delivery of the projects, many problems were encountered during the delivery that caused people to act irresponsibly. Even when project managers announced failures in delivery, no one was held accountable for the failure. By the time the customers received their products and ITCO was paid for the project, many variables would have been involved in the process, which made it difficult for finance to prove that the sales department or the salesman was at fault, even when the sale ended in a loss.

Reaching the demanding sales targets sometimes proved difficult for Fadi and his sales managers. They resolved these difficulties through practices of guilefulness, coaxing, and somewhat coercively committing deviance, which

enabled them to create a representation of sales successes that were scarcely, if at all, grounded on actual sales. Nearing the end of every fiscal year, sales revenues would be way off their targets. It was usual for the vice president of sales to close a few large deals during the last month of every fiscal year. The accounting standard used to report such deals, at the end of a fiscal year, required the delivery of products and services, which physically could not happen, as the suppliers' supply chain needed several weeks to ship and deliver. In many cases, the accounting vice president would allow revenue to be recognized by printing invoices and storing them until the goods were physically delivered. Using such practices, it would then be possible to recognize revenue and profits that actually did not happen in terms of the GAAP¹⁰ accounting rules. The above practices projected artificial sales revenues, as sales managers were claiming sales revenues and margins on sales that the sales operations had not actually (yet) made.

Were sales people and managers aware of their deviance? When I asked Fadi about the irregularities in his sales operations, he replied; *"It is not my department's fault; it is the customer's, who implicitly asks for certain terms that sometimes are difficult to accommodate in a deal and hence we resort to finding ways to get revenue recognized before the end of the fiscal year. And since this is done almost every year, it does not really impact the overall figures. It is as if next year's revenue is recognized this year, so subsequent years will have the same effect."* But if projects were cancelled after the end of the fiscal year, the status of having met the sales target would stay the same.

Change is only possible if managers and consultants accept the need for change. Otherwise you will get lip-service and the status quo. In ITCO, the owner has complete authority over financial decisions. However, the local owner did not get involved in the daily operations of his companies. His inquiries were more related to profits and the amount of cash in the bank. Government, a very important client, likes to see a strong person who is in control of all labor and visa-related issues. Other forms of power are less visible and more implicit. For an expatriate, being the president or vice president of a company is the highest rank that any expatriate can attain in the UAE. The president and vice presidents of ITCO had made the grade. The commanding tone and language used in operational daily practices reflected this.

¹⁰ GAAP is standard accounting set of rules that are usually mandated by international auditing firms. GAAP details how revenue is recognized in trading and project completion.

At the end of the fiscal year of 2005, I attended a quarterly sales meeting, to try to understand how targets are set and how sales managers go about meeting those targets. In one of the sales meetings, the tone and voice of the president clearly demonstrated his power:

“The fiscal year ends in three months and you are behind targets. We all need to roll up our sleeves and make a difference before the end of May. As experienced sales people, you need to start taking more ownership and getting closer to meeting your targets and know what is going on within your accounts. You need to be focused and serious, I am confident that you can achieve it. What I do not want to hear are excuses on why you cannot close deals. I will be calling on each of you to check on every opportunity. I am not going to be happy if we do not meet our targets.”

The sales people gathered for a coffee or cigarette after the sales meeting. Ahmed, one of the sales managers, commented on the meeting:

“They do not know that it is mostly the customer who is delaying the deals. We cannot accelerate such events. They should be more on the ground and listen to what customers have to say. They cannot just threaten us like this!”

The president of ITCO did frequently reiterate the importance of the change initiatives to the vice presidents, and I was often invited to attend some of the executive meetings. It is typical for the president to call for such a meeting; very rarely did a vice president call one. Late in 2005, I attended the meeting related to adopting a new business model for operations. The meeting started with the president talking us through power points. The slides were designed by the graphics department of ITCO, and they were really outstanding. The colors, the animation and the graphics, were some of the best I had ever seen. The meeting started with the president presenting the slides' content. Interruptions were not allowed. Vice presidents were to sit and listen. The 'Five Gears' model (see Figure 8) was introduced during the meeting, which depicted five main departments owning and managing the five major processes influencing how the supply-chain from sales to delivery should work. The president explained and told everyone 'what' and 'why' the model should be implemented. Some questions were raised and I noticed that the vice presidents were impressed and had no comments. Strangely the meeting ended with the president mentioning that more would be explained in later sessions. By December 2005, new rules on

sales were implemented and a new system to map the ‘Five Gears’ model started to take shape.

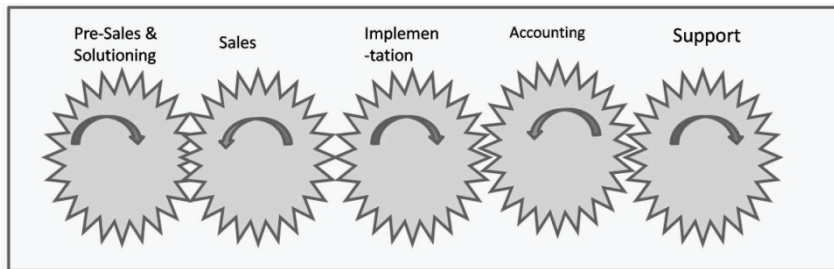


Figure 8. Five Gears model.

But the gap between the rhetoric and the actual application of the model was apparent to all. This created anxiety, tension, and reciprocal blaming; people yelled, were accused, and humiliated. Managers were more than ever cynical and pessimistic. In a meeting with the vice president of sales, I suggested that the new model was not working at all well. The vice president commented:

“The problem is not ‘what’ and ‘why’, but leading on the ground and showing others ‘how’ to implement the new model. We always fail in implementation. We have very good ideas, but people are not motivated to implement them. It is a people issue; they do not change, no one wants to lead or to try something new.”

But the managers told a very different story:

“They (the executives) impose on us this stuff that do[es] not work; they should consult us before implementing such systems. Anyhow, we just fill in the paperwork and show them what they expect to see and get our work approved. We are more afraid of getting blamed and being shouted at than getting through the paper work. Everyone runs away and blames the other when accountability is the issue.”

Actually, accounting and finance is manned with over forty employees. The vice president of finance had been with ITCO for over 30 years. He came from

Lebanon and had moved through the ranks within ITCO over the years. He understood how banks and auditors operated and maintained good relationships with other vice presidents and employees. There had never been an internal audit in ITCO. This only happened in 2010, after the 2008 global financial crisis had wrecked havoc. The vice president of finance is well respected by the owner who visits him frequently, in most cases to inquire about profits. Applying pressure to maintain levels of cash flow and profits is the vice president's main task. He is very aware of the difficulties ITCO faces to recuperate cash from projects. In his view the sales department is the main cause for project failure, and the problems in collecting receivables.

I did slowly gain some access to the finance department. Initially, the chief accountant, a certified account from India, did not welcome my presence in the department. No one would give me the time of day, and my queries were redirected to the vice president. It took many months to gain access. My relationship with another certified accountant from India in another company helped me gain some legitimacy. He explained to ITCO's chief accountant that he had known me for many years and that I could be trusted. Only then, was I welcomed. I happen to like Indian food, and have an interest in Indian culture, so spending evenings in the accounting department worked out well for me.

I wanted to better understand ITCO's finances after having heard so much about the problems in projects and receivables collection. The chief accountant told stories of how projects were not priced accurately and how ITCO was never able to collect the last payments on projects. When I asked him what the role of the auditors was in pointing out these problems to management, his reply was as follows:

“The auditors come and spend one to two weeks, they look at few of the transactions, they discover minor things, and they leave. In a few instances, they have alerted the company to cases such as the vast amount of outstanding receivables, but in most of these cases, they just advise the vice president how to implement an acceptable solution to get the end-of-year reports signed off. ITCO needs to show a substantial balance sheet and profits fully audited; otherwise the banks might be reluctant to provide us with much needed credit.”

The president and a few of the vice presidents showed no embarrassment about being unable to report higher profits. Profits had not grown for several years. It

seemed what was important was reporting profits on a par with previous years. I observed tough discussions during which the vice president of finance revealed that no profits would be reported for the financial year of 2008. All the vice presidents were asked to revise their revenue recognition¹¹ of projects and report back to the finance department, to see if higher revenue recognition could lead to reporting profits.

‘Profit’ was a very vague concept at ITCO. ITCO kept borrowing money from the banks, almost monthly, creating a paradox that no one volunteered to explain. If you are making money why do you have to constantly borrow more? I was only able to uncover the (un-)reality of the ‘profits’ in 2010, once the financial crisis had hit ITCO hard, only then was I allowed to critically examine the numbers.

I did take part in some of the end of June discussions where compensation and bonuses are reviewed. Overall company targets are discussed with the owner and the appropriate bonuses for the executives are agreed upon. Sales commissions are paid on margins and meeting sales quota targets. The only control is by the auditors who report to the owner and not the executives. Since meeting targets translates to commissions, bonuses and profits, revenue is often reported that usually would go unrecognized according to accepted accounting principles. Revenue recognition in the IT industry is usually recorded based on an interpretation of what kinds of products are being sold and if the products entail the delivery of a solution or implementation. A sales project passes a scrutiny of whether the revenue from the sales of the products and implementations meets the criteria of segmentation. Revenues from products sold with no implementation can be recognized once shipped and invoiced. Revenues from products that are sold with implementation can only be recognized in relation to the percentage of implementation completed. So if the project extends for months, the recognition might happen monthly, for example, once invoices for the work completed, are issued.

But at ITCO, revenue associated with implementation was recorded when it did not meet the revenue-recognition principles. Early recognition of revenue at the

¹¹ Revenue recognition allows a company to report within a fiscal year, amounts of money that usually follow accepted accounting principle rules on delivery, shipping and invoicing. While sales revenue grew, ITCO’s money and profit issues also increased. ITCO engages world-renowned auditors such as YNE, who report to the UAE national owners and certify the accuracy of ITCO’s accounts.

end of the fiscal year meant that the subsequent year's revenue would be less. But, in the words of the vice president of sales, "*We have 12 months to make it happen, and maybe we get lucky with some big deal in the coming fiscal year that will then cover the recognized revenue we reported the year before.*" In essence, the practice continued from year to year. Every year it was as difficult to reach the revenue targets as the previous year.

On a day-to-day basis, the project managers are the backbone to project implementation. Profit is made or lost in project delivery. It is anticipated that project management should form the core to the company. Typically the project managers' tasks included: scheduling projects and budgeting time required to meet deadlines, negotiating revisions, changes and additions to the contractual agreements, preparing and submitting budget estimates and progress and cost tracking reports, interpreting and explaining plans and contract terms to team members and clients, dealing with the sponsors of the project. Actually, project management was much more intricate. Usually, after the sales team had confirmed a sale involving implementing software and installing systems at a customer site, the services department appointed a project manager to the project. An initial project scope session would take place. Project managers would conduct an analysis of what is required to be delivered. They would discuss the project with the solutions designer and the sales people in order to better understand the required solution. Thereafter, the project manager sets out to define the project work plan and the deliverables. A summary of the costs or a project budget is developed. Project managers also note potential problems that they foresee, based on previous sales contracts and differences between what the request for proposal (RFP) stipulated and what is deliverable. Project managers point to problematic areas and send emails to their supervisors and heads of departments, making them aware that these differences exist. It is a way for project managers to anticipate problems and not to be blamed later for failing to implement on time and on budget.

The contention between sales managers and project managers is evident during their meetings. There is a very low level of trust. One project manager pointed out to me:

"Sales people – all they care about is making a sale; they do not understand the problems we get into in every project once they commit 'stuff' to the customer

that is not written into the contract. In fact, no single project contract was ever implemented as per the RFP or final contract; there is always some commitment that sales managers have given to customers and they never documented. We only come to find out what, when the project is underway and we then have to fight to see who is to blame. No vice president or quality manager would step in to resolve these differences before the project started.”

The customers were usually large organizations with several hundred users; they required the installation of large IT servers and systems. Customers usually appoint someone in their department to act as project manager from their side, and in other cases the customer IT managers take on an extra role as customer project manager. ITCO's project managers maintain very good relationships with customer project managers. In some of the meetings I attended, customers' project managers would blame ITCO for issues and problems, but would not blame ITCO's project manager.

Methodologies, tools and frameworks all get their due in the mapping out of the task project management. But 'communications' seem to be ignored. Only project team members usually labeled as technical or functional consultants are to be kept abreast of developments. Seldom was communication with service directors or vice presidents planned. Only when something went wrong in the project did this seem to occur. Nonetheless, it was common for project managers to pop into the vice presidents' offices to briefly communicate, standing at the door, commenting: *“Project is running well; everything seems to be going OK. I just spoke to the IT manager and he has nothing to complain about.”* The HR manager had previously mentioned such behavior. She went on to say that in more than 90% of the projects, the contrary was actually true; projects were not on time and were slipping into loss. However, it was never possible to know the final outcome of a project in terms of profit or loss until closure.

Project team members often arrived late at customer sites. The project manager would sometimes complain to the team, if the customer was too strict about timing. In some instances, project managers would be less strict, understanding that team members usually stay late into the night hours to complete their work. The project manager usually meets with all the consultants to get an idea of where they are at and whichever deliverables they are putting out this or next week. In many instances, a consultant or developer points to issues with client implementation. The project manager listens to the challenges, reviews the

client's contract, but almost always finds that the contractual terms are too ambiguous. On other occasions, the project manager meets the client to insist on services that have been requested that cannot be rendered in the packaged solution. Customizing a solution to meet the client's need could put the implementation into jeopardy. A solution consultant is usually involved in trying to limit customization. I noticed that project managers, in many of their projects, failed to enforce the final decision. In those instances, the customer usually made a decision demanding changes to the solution. These changes are not communicated to ITCO's services director or vice presidents. ITCO's project managers tend to conceal such critical information from others in order to avoid blame when unable to meet customer demands. Such projects end in losses.

The vice presidents were aware of reasons why projects might fail or at least they thought they were. Failures could be attributed to the scope of the project (or lack thereof), and to the lack of commitment from the project managers. The losses came about as a result of project managers and consultants exceeding the planned time and not meeting the milestones originally proposed for the project. Because consultants and project managers were led by the customer in terms of how to implement the procured system, costs accumulated were beyond the project manager's control. Instead, project managers should have been leading the implementation based on the original customer requirements and discuss with the customers and the vice president new ways to address the increasing costs. ITCO's projected costs were usually based on the initial customer requirements, and so a contract would be drawn up and priced based on those requirements and the time needed to configure the IT products for the prescribed solution. Consultants and project managers were supposed to comply with the fundamental baseline on which the project was priced. They were not supposed to reconfigure the system, as the cost impact would be unpredictable. They were supposed to stick to the contract, as signed. All contracts were fixed priced, i.e. ITCO would not be allowed to change the price once the contract was signed. Large discrepancies between contracts and reality led to losses in many projects.

ITCO's vice presidents were convinced that the losses were as a result of diverging from contracts. Executives and the leadership were focused on performance targets, control procedures and other impersonal mechanisms, but failed to acknowledge that they themselves were not engaging in proper

governance of the projects in a systematic manner in order to reveal issues, risks and delays, which affected project profitability. While there was a formalized governance process overseen by the services director, project governance did not reflect the reality of what happened at the project sites.

In ITCO's project plans, each activity was well detailed, reflecting the starting time, ending time and number of resources required. Each project manager would spend almost a whole day, before the end of every week, updating their project plans. All these plans were consolidated and centralized under a system where any manager or vice president could conduct a thorough analysis of any project. However, when visiting projects, I discovered that very few of the stated plan activities matched what the consultants were actually implementing. It seemed as if project managers strongly believed that what they represented on their project plans was the reality of the project, but in fact, it was not what the consultants were actually doing. After several failed projects, it was apparent that several factors were contributing to project failure. Causes and remedies for project failure were documented on the company website.

The project managers were eager to be certified. Seeking PMP (Project Management Professional) certification was important. PMP certification is granted by a North American organization that creates the curriculum and administers the exams. It is usually a costly endeavor, but project managers believed that such certification gave them more status and better compensation, so almost all project managers at ITCO sought and obtained PMP certification. To this degree they were motivated to learn and to improve. They attended several implementation methodology sessions and made an effort to use some of what they had learned. This meant defining deliverables and better control of milestones. More attention to customer requirements could help to deliver and test the required system. In most of the cases, they followed the methodology and copied the templates for each deliverable, and had the customer sign off on the template-based documents. They mentioned that in many cases the customer would not read the whole document, but would sign the documents so as not to delay the project. Of course, such practices were not recommended, but project managers needed to move forward on their projects, and thus they allowed such practices to continue.

New training could, therefore, reinforce ITCO's commitment to its managers, and if it was delivered professionally, it might trigger some change. The decision was to target specific training interventions directed to areas of weakness needing urgent improvement. A workshop was organized where project managers could identify problematic areas that they usually encountered in their daily practices. Risk management and governance tools and practices could strengthen the implementation methodology. Project managers would be enabled to analyze project stakeholders and to identify risks. Before planning the workshop, I talked with several of the project managers and their manager. Hamed, one of the ITCO project managers had previously worked for IBM and had attended many workshops. I asked him about his experience with such learning sessions:

“Workshops and training sessions are always good to have. But it is very difficult to get consultants and customers to abide by new practices. Consultants do not want to do more than what they are doing and customers, in most of the cases, do not read documents or care to implement new procedures or policies. Customers feel that it is your responsibility to get the system working to their requirements and anything extra is not their problem. We have seen in the past and in current projects many issues. I assume that the new practices should be able to help us manage these risks and issues.”

Hamed was working in Kuwait on a project called PEFKU (an oil and gas company implementation of an HRMS system). He mentioned that the PEFKU project was facing many challenges. He further noted that the company was managed by locals (Kuwaitis) and that PEFKU's employees were trying their best to avoid the new system. PEFKU wanted to hire non-nationals to work on the application, but no-one had been hired. At the same time, PEFKU's project owners had recently changed and the new ones were blaming the previous owners for the lack of progress on the project; they were afraid to take ownership of it. In addition, PEFKU's users had complained several times about Hamed. They felt that he was not leading the project. When I made queries about Hamed's performance and work, I was informed that he always came late to work and that he did not manage consultants at the project site. Hamed was well paid, and being outside his base country (the UAE), he was entitled to many fringe benefits. Hamed had been on the PEFKU project almost eight months,

and Edmaz, his direct manager, commented, *“He just let the situation get to what it is without raising red flags to alert others to the problems early in the project.”*

When asked what would help make things better at PEFKU, Hamed mentioned that more resources would be needed, and thus the cost of the project would have to be at least 50% more. Hamed also mentioned that executives always blamed the project manager for mishaps, and that he felt powerless in all these cases. Edmaz was frustrated because Hamed’s projects were failing and he was unable to do anything to aid matters. Edmaz:

“Customers are not easy to deal with, but Hamed does not seem to care much, and every time I audit and hold him accountable, he promises to make things better and not to fail me. But this same behavior and promises [have] been going on for many months now.”

I decided to also call Harb, another project manager at a multimillion dollar project, and to get his input. Harb was a graduate of the American University of Beirut (AUB). He talks with ease, is always calm and he speaks perfect English. My first encounter with Harb had been a few years previous, when he and his colleagues started the *Linker*, an internal newsletter for ITCO. The newsletter was a success, and many of the employees and consultants liked it and talked about it. Harb:

“TELCO is definitely one of the most resistant projects I have seen. The client is bound by governmental laws and regulations—this makes him/her resistant to accept new software and new business processes. In Lebanon, finding a skilled-job is difficult, and employees fear losing their jobs or positions due to the new ERP system being implemented. Managers fear employees who are gaining extra knowledge and thus might become unmanageable. The fate of the project is all very political. All the above, and many more reasons, make TELCO an interesting subject to analyze.”

Harb sounded positive and motivated. When asked about his experience with using new tools and practices, he said that by upgrading his current knowledge he should be more effective. I was somehow pleased with his replies. He sounded positive and willing.

My objective was to introduce new tools and practices, to instill a strengthened awareness of risk and stakeholder relations which would in turn lead to better

governance, higher profits, and improved customer satisfaction. I contracted a training specialist to coach ITCO managers in project management practices. I thought that the managers would be more inclined to listen to a professional in the field than to a generalist. ITCO's vice president of services approved the initiative. I informed the vice president that I was seeking to bring an expert from Canada, Bruno Das, who had worked with the Big 5 consulting firms. He had over fifteen years of experience in project and change management. Bruno used to work for YNE and had worked on IT projects.

Bruno, on my suggestion, decided to conduct a needs analysis and acquaintance session, so he could customize the training sessions based on local needs. The workshops were scheduled for November 2008. They were held at ITCO's main offices in Abu Dhabi, (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Bruno's workshop in Abu Dhabi.

I video recorded the sessions so I could study and analyze them later. I wanted, not just to hear what was said, but also to see body movements and facial expressions. Not only were words available for analysis, and inflection, tone, or other vocal modalities, but also gestures and body language. I ended up with in excess of sixteen hours of recordings. I asked all participants whether they would be constrained or annoyed if I filmed the sessions, but nobody said that they cared or felt intimidated or concerned. No-one even questioned why I was recording or considered it an intrusion.

Bruno flew in to conduct the sessions. He had prepared a series of presentations, and planned to conduct the sessions to allow as much dialogue and interaction as possible. He would throw back questions on the subjects that project managers were trying to get answers to or problematize possible solutions. Bruno was set to try to uncover the issues around the failures in projects. I played the role of a participant, attending the sessions, listening to the discussions and not interfering in any manner. On some days, I did not attend, but left the camera on for the whole period, even during the coffee breaks. Managers attended from the UAE as well as from the other countries like Kuwait, Lebanon and Qatar. The managers working in those countries were expats, living in those countries during a project's duration.

The first session was to start at 9:00 a.m. Most people came later than that; in fact, some people only showed up at 10:00. Edmaz, the service delivery director, mentioned to Bruno that it was very common for people in the UAE to show up late. Muhammed, one of the project managers, said that customers also often showed up late. Bruno commented that sometimes individuals use such behavior as a power play, and in many cases, individuals are held accountable, while other people may feel insecure and intentionally show up late.

It was really only Muhammed and Edmaz who were concerned about the time issue. The other project managers were yawning and did not contribute. The theme of being late continued, and Bruno mentioned that one way to change this behavior was for the latecomers to have to sing a song once they entered the room. In this manner, the participants could be held accountable for being late and might feel embarrassed. When asked about whether coming late could be changed, all replied that it could not, and it was fine to keep it that way.

During the discussions on how to conduct a risk analysis, Bruno argued that the analysis should not be too widespread but instead should involve a few key individuals within the project. He explained that the main objective was to use the analysis as a means to identify issues or factors affecting project progress. The results of the risk analysis would contain sensitive information. The main objective was to use the stakeholder analysis as a means to manage resistance and to identify everyone's benefits and interests in the project. Bruno warned that while explaining the analysis' results, project managers would need to be careful and refrain from communicating the findings to a larger community of

users, as this might create problems, such as inviting rumors, envy and other factors that could, in fact, defeat the success of the project.

The attendees reacted to Bruno's comment by arguing that sometimes it is good to lie and not speak the truth so as not to upset the other parties. Muhammed mentioned that there were always people watching and listening so anything one did would be communicated eventually to management. The argument continued for some time. Edmaz was quite open-minded, and having worked in Canada for some years, replied that executives were not just waiting to hear what other people had to say just and punish someone.

During the coffee breaks, the project managers took the opportunity to talk to me and to discuss some of their issues and concerns. Jead took me aside and started the conversation stating that I had not come to the UAE lately, and that he missed my advice. Jead started to tell me that a previous director had promised him a substantial raise before he left:

Jead: "The previous director promised to look into my pay package sometime back. Now that he has left, I am worried whether what was agreed will come through. I would like you to know what was agreed."

Me: "What are you working on at present? Did you have a suggested percentage on what the increase would be?"

Jead: "I am working in Abu Dhabi. My current package is almost 22,000 AED (\$6,000/mo. USD). Now that you ask me about my expectations about the percentage increase, I would expect ITCO to raise me to the normal market price for my qualifications which is 35,000 AED (\$9,500/mo. USD), which requires a 60 % increase to my current package. I know that you are influential and they listen to you."

Me: "Take it easy, Jead. I can only advise, but you do understand that I do not make the decisions around here?!"

Jead: "Your reaction is the best proof that for a long period my package has been way below what it should have been. Please simply tell me why after five years of hard work and sacrifice I should be paid less than the market price of someone of my caliber? Unless you don't believe that I have correctly stated the market price now for someone of similar qualifications. Yeah ... the percentage

looks big but this shows for how long I have been underestimated and underpaid.”

Me: “I will communicate to the vice president what you say. You are definitely a person I respect a lot and your work has been commended by the HR manager and customers.”

Jead: “I was just expecting a faster response on this, really months ago; plus, I am going for annual leave and I want to close the issue before I go.”

Me: “I know that management always studies raises and changes carefully. They consider many variables that affect all stakeholders. If you look through the past years, they have always been able to satisfy over 95% of the employees. But Jead, ITCO needs all the help consultants and project managers can give them to improve ITCO. This is why they are investing so much on this OCM initiative.”

Jead: “I would always be happy to help make ITCO a better place for everybody. As you opened the subject, one of the things that really frustrate me, however, is the very weak response from the company when it comes to things that are in the employees’ benefit.”

Jead complained extensively about the previous and current management. He was dissatisfied. However, it was difficult for me to believe everything Jead said, though I was definitely not fully aware of all the facts. I thought that some of his comments might be true and others might be fabricated to win my support. In fact, it took me more meetings and considerable time to understand Jead, and to know when his stories were true or fabricated. His constant assertion of his needs and demands for salary compensation increases had a negative impact on the HR manager and vice president of services. Apparently Jead always needed more money, because he was constantly investing into either real estate housing ventures or buying new stuff for his family. While he seldom achieved his goals, he remained committed to ITCO throughout the years, but asking for more salary and compensation seemed a way of life for him.

I was curious about what was being said during the breaks. I later reviewed the video tapes. There were instances of discussions between the managers that dwelled on compensation. There was also talk of how some projects were more difficult than others. While Bruno was still in the room, there was limited

conversation between the managers. As soon as he left they started talking. In one of the sessions, during a short break, I noticed that one of the managers was checking whether Bruno had left the conference room before he spoke (had they forgotten that there was a video camera sitting on a tripod right in front of them?). With Bruno gone, he comments:

“I am really surprised ... really surprised [a project manager speaking in a serious and concerned manner]. I am surprised about how Harb mentioned that his project is not delayed, and the customer does not want to take ownership ... the customer is paying for the licenses; the customer is paying for the implementation and everything else, and the project is for the benefit of the customer ... and it is all for the customer ... and the customer does not want to take ownership! From my experience in every plan there are activities, these are well defined and have end-dates. So if the activities are not fulfilled, then there should be delays. But they tell you that there are no delays. I think that the project manager should pin-point this with the customer and make him aware of late activities and that he [the customer] is not doing his part. So there must be delays somewhere. I am surprised.”

Another manager replied,

“These are usually fixed priced projects. The customer has done his homework and found the software to be the best. So they know that their decision was the right one as Oracle is the best around. He knows that eventually the system will be delivered. He might delay activities now and then, move other activities to future dates. It is always like this. Managers at customer sites seem relaxed once they have proven to their managers that they have bought the best. They do not care thereafter to get the system working in the fastest time.”

The first manager still not convinced, replied,

“Project managers should have everything documented, approved and signed off by the customer, so that they protect themselves against unpredictable changes and they protect the company’s interest.”

Another project manager replied,

“I have this customer that was happy with some of the implementation and gave me an extension of \$10M USD on the project, he saw another part being well implemented after a few months, and gave me another \$17M USD

extension. Now after six months he is thinking of another \$30M USD extension.”

A practice manager comments,

“Yeah, he gives you more and more project and money, but he is increasing your risks. Is this or is this not a risk? Documents are not approved or signed-off? Who bears the responsibility if something goes wrong?”

The first project manager (laughing) replies,

“The customer IT manager and some finance managers are ‘shabeehah’; they want to show something done to their superiors, so they want to show new stuff and hide the facts of older projects; there is some kind of knavery. What happens at the end no-one knows.”

Bruno walked back into the room and started to resume the session. The practice manager, still confused, commented to Bruno:

“Stakeholders in projects have a major impact on the project, but it seems that it is taken lightly by project managers and customer representatives.”

No-one commented and Bruno returned to continuing his presentation. The carry through did not happen. What was presented was not really discussed. During Bruno’s sessions there were a vast number of questions on every subject Bruno introduced that were relevant.

In one of the risk analysis sessions, one of the managers pointed to the difficulty in believing what stakeholders said. The manager mentioned that many customers say something but practice and decide something else. This behavior is confusing; he wondered whether the analysis would really have any value. Bruno answered that the analysis had to be conducted regularly and hence irregularities and differences could be identified that should then be questioned. In response to the presentation of the stakeholder analysis, the managers started to argue, relentlessly, seemingly trying to find the cause or even the root cause of project politics. The arguments really started to pick up after Bruno had presented the stakeholder analysis and its purpose. Ali, a project manager, asked, *“If we do not know what we need to change from the very beginning, how can we start this change?”* Others supported Ali, stressing that it is necessary to know

the change requirements before we can use the stakeholder analysis; only then can you know what and how to ask questions. You could feel that there were political constraints working in the minds of the managers. Bruno stood astonished.

Everyone around the conference table had a different point of view. Everyone insisted that behavior, routines, tradition and ways of working were different in every country and that the tools might not work as prescribed. It was clear, after a long session that only a few were convinced that the tools explained by Bruno could work. Bruno, surprised by the views of the project managers, observed, *“These are best practice tools used in many parts of the world and the whole of North America. They should work here in the UAE as well.”*

The sessions continued with the theme of leadership in projects, mainly talking about how to get people to change their behaviors to come up with solutions rather than just bringing in problems. Harb and other managers stressed that they wanted to be systematic and to follow prescribed processes. But Bruno stressed how it is easy to find fault in people and their behavior, but more difficult to praise them for good behavior.

At the end of several days of workshop, most of the managers were exhausted. I hoped that something had been accomplished. My expectations were that some of the knowledge might be put into practice, hopefully producing better project outcomes. Themes that kept coming up during the workshop had centered on relationships and expectations, for instance, executives going out and meeting customers and the provision of resources on time. But the expectations of the executives had all focused on staff assessment and evaluation. So between the project managers and the executives there was clearly a gap. I emailed all the participants and reiterated the objectives of the workshop as a learning event, which should help to enhance the service level at customer sites. I also asked Bruno to reflect on the sessions and his stay in the UAE¹²:

¹² This summary has been edited and shortened.

It is a human tendency to focus on differences. But in the interest of a balanced perspective and fairness, it is important to look at what the similarities are between the North American and Gulf Region contexts. It is the similarities that will make implementing Organizational Change Management (OCM) either possible or very problematic. If I was to use a (very unscientific) gut assessment of what is the ratio of similarities as opposed to differences, my interaction with the people in the UAE leads me to assign a ratio of 85/15 similar to different.

This degree of similarity leads me to believe strongly that introducing OCM to the region is not only possible, but is actually a big opportunity, particularly in the context of the changes that I currently understand are happening in the region (more on that below). The caveat is that the 15% that is different, is significant, and needs to be taken seriously. And it needs to be taken seriously more in the approach used to introduce OCM into the region, as opposed to the content of the methodology and tools that comprise a good OCM framework.

Just a caveat: All of these observations are personal and are based on a brief (9 day) visit, intense as it was, and on numerous conversations on this topic. It is likely that continued interaction would lead to some changes of my opinions.

Similarities between the North American (*North American in this context represents Canada and the US*) **and Gulf Regions**

The main similarity can be summarized by the simple phrase “*people are people*” the world over. We are all motivated in various degrees by financial gains, recognition, physical and psychological comfort, and of course, fear. The majority of people value feeling respected and value trust in relationships, they want to feel like they contribute positively to an environment, and that they have an intrinsic value to one another and to an organization.

I found the same thing in the Gulf. During the workshop, the participants showed open-mindedness and curiosity at a level above what I expected. They seemed open to challenge their own ways of thinking and assumptions, although habitual tendencies made it difficult for them to

actually do so on a consistent basis. They showed a high openness to new ideas and concepts. They also showed a degree of eagerness above what I would expect to find in Canada, and a degree of skepticism and cynicism far below what I would expect to see here. I also found the desire to form trust as a basis in a relationship to be very high.

The main motivators seemed to be frustration with the status quo, and seeing OCM as a likely and significant solution, at least for a good portion of their project management problems. They want to improve their own current situation, and to make their own personal work life easier. They are attracted to the 'latest management techniques' and being the first to use these.

Their ability to 'break the ice' and engage in candid and open dialogue was on par with what I would expect to find among North American workshop participants. They showed an ability to place trust quickly into the facilitator and participate in activities that could prove potentially embarrassing personally, and showed an ability to engage in interview-type dialogue among themselves very quickly (first two hours of the workshop).

Whatever the reason for these positive differences, as well as similarities with North American participants, it leads me to conclude that introducing OCM into this part of the world is very feasible. And considering the eagerness to know more about OCM and apply the tools, I believe it is a concept and solution for which the Gulf region is 'ripe.'

Differences between the North American and Gulf Regions

One of the major differences is the mental habit of deferring analysis, planning and decision-making, to organizational superiors. I observed two habits consistently at all levels. The first was that more 'confident' employees react to crises quickly by immediately escalating problems to their superiors. They present problems in a 'raw' form, and respond to proposed solutions from their superiors by countering these solutions with either negatives (*"We've tried that and it can't be done"*), or new information that also reduced the potential impact of the proposed solution (*"That plan is good, but the customer does not want to even see us as of last week"*).

The second habit was that employees who could be classified as ‘pleasers’ – do not want to offend by saying ‘No’, and therefore agree to solutions knowing that they will not be able to meet their part of the commitment. They will agree to meet at a certain time, or would assure a customer that they would fix an issue, in order to mollify, only to later either show up late, if at all, or to allow the issue to fester without any meaningful intervention. They try to come to a solution on their own, and try to implement it. If it works, the day would be saved. If not, more silence follows for fear of offending superiors and customers, and of course, would this leads to further and worse crises.

In either of these cases the employees do not stop to analyze the root causes of the problem, either individually, or with others. In the UAE this seems to be the *modus operandi*. Another related mental habit is the lack of planning. When a situation is encountered and solutions are proposed, people do not stop to plan how a particular solution should be implemented, apart from a few initial tactical action steps. For example, thinking through what initial steps should be taken, what the consequences could be, and what options should be contemplated or attempted, should any of the consequences come to pass, are not part of the problem solving approach. This habit is most pronounced in recurring problem situations. Since these were Oracle systems implementations mostly, some of the same issues tend to arise with a fair degree of frequency (e.g., a key stakeholder not responding to e-mails over a two month period, or a customer asking for additional functionality and pushing back on the price). There is no attempt to anticipate a plan of action should these high probability events occur, and each time it happens it is treated as an almost unexpected crisis situation.

Rather than sending the individual ‘back to the drawing board’ to come up with the root causes and options, managers engage in solutioning, usually without trying to understand the root causes themselves. Their personal effectiveness is judged on how well they deal with crises, rather than on how well they manage the processes so that these crises do not occur.

Other habits observed were: deference to authority as demonstrated in the reluctance to propose decisions to superiors and equating leadership

completely with organizational authority; the degree of importance placed on relationships to manage business projects as opposed to process or merit.

Changes and Developments in the Gulf Region

I think companies in the region are ‘growing up.’ They are becoming, and actually are already, large, complex, organizational entities, with all of the challenges that this presents. In many cases, these companies or business units are still managed like small- to mid-sized enterprises through personal relationships. The reality is though that the increased order of complexity requires managing processes, rather than people directly. A merit-based world-view does not allow for favoritism based on personal relationships. Where should the line be drawn between the region’s perspective of giving a monetary gift for a special favor, and the Western perspective of what constitutes corruption? For how long will very competent Syrian, Pakistani, Shia, or female managers be denied access to executive managerial positions?

In terms of metaphor, the current mindset is the ‘Desert Tribe’ metaphor: Several tightly knit, but *separate* and *individualistic, family units* of desert tribes both sharing and fighting for *scarce resources* and *reacting* to adversity. The current situation, however, is pointing to an evolution toward a completely different metaphor, best described as a ‘Global Brand’: *United global organizations* managing *abundance* with best-in-class human resources based on *merit* and *collective team* collaboration *planning* for sustainable prosperity.

How change will manifest itself, is open to speculation. What is certain, however, is that change will lead to a re-evaluation of what motivates individuals to do things. For example, if the power of personal relationships erodes, the ability to use top-down organizational power or personal influence to get individuals to ‘follow orders’ will also erode. What will replace it? Leaders will need, and will seek, new tools. OCM offers them a solution.

OCM Implications

In summary, the observation that ‘people are people’ makes introducing OCM to companies in the Gulf region at the very least feasible. The current openness, curiosity and eagerness shown by individuals toward tools and techniques to improve current management situations makes the region ‘ripe’ for introducing OCM, and presents a very good opportunity. However, there are challenges. Not only is OCM a new concept in the Gulf, but it also demands introducing a new way of thinking. It will take time for people to become ‘unstuck’ and start to analyze root causes, discuss potential solutions, propose feasible options, and limit the habit of ‘excessive politeness’ to overcome their desire to please and their inhibition on making decisions.

This is not something to be done quickly. Instead, it requires: awareness of new techniques, tools and concepts; understanding of their appropriate use and their benefits; incremental shifts in habit.

As you will see below, the workshops failed more than they succeeded. Few new skills or attitudes resulted. Thus how could Bruno send me such an unrealistic assessment? For one thing he was selling OCM and himself. I had brought him in to change the myopic sales mania of ITCO and instead of changing it, he caught it. He wanted what everyone else wants in the UAE, more consulting, more billings, and more revenue. When during the workshops he lost contact with the group he asserted his cultural capital and ethnocentrism. These methods are state-of-the-art, seen from America, so they are ‘true’. Thus the long passages in his evaluation about cultural equality can either be seen as a conscious effort to repair the damage or as an unconscious effort to assuage the cultural violence inflicted. ITCO managers were not willing to engage with OCM. On a very superficial and rational level they might be willing to ape some of the phrases, but they reject Bruno’s rationality first approach. They live in communities of relatedness and have no desire to become rational monads. ‘Wasta’ may be repugnant to a North American, but the assumption of mutual obligation and relational logic seems natural to people in the Middle East. And in this Bruno is on thin ice. After all, I had brought him as a favor to ITCO and probably (implicitly) expected him to help me further to find my way in Canada.

As for ITCO's managers, their taken-for-granted assumptions weren't going to change merely thanks to a few days of training. The consultants and managers were trained by Oracle. Oracle methodology was the only way they knew how to deliver their projects. In fact, it sounded as if all the consultants, no matter where they came from, had constructed an identity that reflects the Oracle methodology. Consultants and project managers were proud of this identity. Knowing what Oracle had taught them, allowed them to move from company to company seeking better compensation.

Some of the difficulties encountered during the sessions, I think resulted from the project managers and consultants having codified their practices into a set of rules that they followed blindly. The rules were adopted 'unthinkingly'. Their methods are rational behavior but fundamentally rule-driven, lacking in novelty, or any intention to change. The project managers are 'robotized' and have never asked questions about the rules. And these rules are what they have to offer the labor market. Indeed they automatically try to find solutions. As mentioned by Ali, what we need to change is what precedes the need to change. When I asked some of the attendees, they explained that their methods are an automatic practice for them. Ironically Bruno repeated the same fallacies, just differently. OCM according to Bruno was inherently correct. Anticipating, planning, rationalizing was true. His defense of rational individuality was just as blind as the project managers' assumptions of 'how to act'. Bruno sees a rational linear world leading to North American attitudes and practices. In so far as ITCO and her managers did not share the same assumptions as he did, they were (in effect) backward.

I wish to draw attention to the core themes. I was struck by how little we had ever in ITCO really discussed project management practice. The conversations were more focused on emergencies and meeting targets. And I discovered 'stuckness', or the idea that we hold each other in some sort of pattern, which seems difficult to discuss. Indeed, the absence of practice-directed discussion has led me to believe that we actively constrain each other from reflecting because it would be threatening in some way.

My overall impression of the workshop experience is that by becoming repetitive, the taken-for-granted nature of what we do leaves us stuck in our practices, unable to transform, and destined to repeat. What we call best-

practices or Oracle methodology locks us into repetition. Most of the work was understood as repetition. The task was not to innovate and experiment, but to make the projects more efficient. ITCO was not a technology driven wild start-up, it was a big firm looking for continuity, predictability and resilience. While no one really wanted a new culture, there were attitudes that could (and did) become self-destructive.

My legitimacy within ITCO was as a change management agent. So I almost had to look at matters from that perspective. I was convinced that ITCO was insufficiently profitable and that projects were sub-optimally managed. While the relationship based culture was fundamental, better reckoning of results was needed. I tried to examine the conversations during and around the workshops to assess what was possible. To better understand ITCO project management I visited project managers at their customer sites, and I visited one project in Lebanon (TELCO) and one project in Abu Dhabi (ADF). The intentions were to gain insight into the project managers' thinking (or their dispositions).

As the weeks passed by, I followed up with Edmaz, a senior project manager. He stated that he wanted to get all the project managers to start using the risk analysis tool that Bruno had provided. Some other project managers were filling in the analysis matrix but others were not. Edmaz commented: *"It has always been the case that you need to follow up with them."*

The risk analysis matrix is an important tool used in projects. Through the use of risk analysis, project managers can create a traffic indicator (red, amber, and green) map, through which risk elements are identified in regards to how they might affect the project and that can mitigate ways to resolve the issues before there is an impact on the profitability of a project. Edmaz communicated, with an email to the project managers requesting them all to fill in the risk analysis template for each of the projects. He explained that the information would help everyone to better understand the risks involved. Harb had mentioned that the risk analysis tool was superb, that it worked 'like magic.'

I wanted to meet with and hear more from the project managers in the field about their adoption of the new knowledge delivered through the workshop sessions and how those sessions might have changed their behavior. I scheduled meetings in Lebanon and Abu Dhabi, with Harb and Jead.

Harb was one of the many project managers at ITCO. Since ITCO conducts implementations throughout the Gulf Region, project managers could stay for several months in different countries, until the final acceptance of the system they were working on was achieved. Harb was managing the TELCO project. TELCO is a telecommunications company in Lebanon, which had acquired the Oracle ERP software and in 2008 had started the implementation of the system. Harb had worked in the UAE and in many other countries in the Gulf Region. He was assigned as the project manager for TELCO. When I asked Harb about his view on the workshop and his use of the risk analysis, he replied:

“I had something similar that was more or less ready, ever since our training last summer. It is indeed an interesting sheet. I think is part of PMP [a project managers’ certification], and hence it is a must for every project manager to include it as part of the project charter. I will send a copy via email to all on the TELCO project.”

Unlike conversations I had with Jead, Harb had not recounted any discomfort before the training. When I asked Harb whether his reflection on the workshops had allowed him to change his attitude or behavior, he responded:

“The workshop was great. I think something was missing when dealing with customers in my projects. It seemed to me as if I know more and that gives me more confidence to do my job.”

Then several months passed, and the TELCO project was reported to be losing money. I asked Edmaz to arrange a visit to the customer in Beirut. I wanted to see and explore the real facts on the ground by meeting with all the project stakeholders. I flew to Lebanon and met Harb, with Edmaz, at a Donuts café near the customer site. I asked Harb why the project had gone so sour, and if the tools and resources had helped him in any manner to make this project a success. The following conversation took place:

Harb: *“I have reported all the issues to Edmaz.”*

Edmaz: (surprised) *“You never mentioned that it was so critical and that the customer was thinking of cancelling the project.”*

Me: *“Did you manage to use the risk analysis template? It is usually meant to map such risks, identify the relationship and politics of the customer, and to*

help to work through the project complexities in order to reach an acceptable project sign-off. Don't you think so?"

Harb: "I filled in two reports so far and I indicted the risks. The customer was refusing to sign off the deliverables. The IT manager signed them on behalf of the project and told us to move on, and that there was no need to get the finance manager (the customer project lead) to sign them off. The issue is that the customer is not committing enough resources to test the system and hence was delaying the sign-offs and acceptance of the project."

Edmaz: "Why didn't you ask for a meeting with executives so that I could help you resolve these issues?"

The meeting went for another hour. Harb was implying somehow that everyone knew the status of the project, and hence there was no reason to blame him for its current status. Harb stayed angry and did not speak much after that, and we each left for home. As I sat in my car, I pondered every conversation and discussion I had had with Harb. I reflected on those moments when Harb had been so positive, indicating that the risk analysis tool was superb, that it would work 'like magic'.

I realized that Harb had kept doing what he always did in projects. The new knowledge was incorporated as a practice. He did implement the risk assessment, but Edmaz had informed me that Harb twisted the reality of the risks in the project, making it look as if everything was going fine. Harb assumed that since the project deliverables were signed off by a department head, that the project was going as per plan. However, Edmaz and Harb knew from contractual agreements, that since the main project lead and sponsor had not signed off on the deliverables, the risks were much higher, and he should have confronted this issue and gotten it resolved before continuing onto other activities.

My second meeting was with Jead. He had attended the workshops. He was the one who always came late. He had started his career at ITCO as a programmer but always wanted to get ahead. He was very meticulous in his work and managed to build a reputation of 'being perfect' after working two years with ITCO, he was promoted to interim project manager; his job was to assist a project manager at some implementation sites. I had a good relationship with Jead. He would always pass by the ITCO main offices and showcase his work to

others. He had been with ITCO for six years now. At the time he ran many projects at ITCO, and his success rate was extremely high. In fact, Jead was, for a few months, also the project manager at TELCO and had insisted on leaving the site and moving to another project. He never mentioned the real reasons, as we knew them now. While attending the workshop, I noticed, on several occasions, how Jead automatically started to try to find immediate solutions to the examples that Bruno used. According to Jead, he had never had a project failure.

He describes below the difficulties he experienced in maintaining and enacting new behavior and practices:

Jead: *"We've made a lot of progress. I work very closely with my consultants. We cannot function well except by being close to the consultants and the customer. Sometimes the customer is very difficult, but we need to absorb him. I usually get very emotional about my projects, and I cannot accept failure. I have always been this way, and I say it as it is. I am not afraid to say the truth. One of my aims is to make money and lots of it."*

Me: *"But you ran away from the TELCO project and did not raise a red flag that the project was going sour."*

Jead: *"You know, Samir, the TELCO project started wrong. The users were complacent, the consultants found Lebanon a nice place to entertain themselves, and hence it was difficult to be accurate. You should also know by now that when a consultant or project manager leaves or requests to leave a project site that there is something going wrong. ITCO's management should then investigate and do a proper due diligence before appointing a new project manager to the project."*

Me: *"But would it not be easier to tell the facts and let ITCO's management work on solutions to resolve the issues than running away? Isn't this what the workshop taught us?"*

Jead: *"True, but in many cases, this does not work, and it might not work at all. The users in this part of the world are like me and you, expatriates, and hence they are in no hurry to end projects. Even if they finish on time, being an expatriate you do not get promoted easily. So they work calmly with no incentives to finish projects."*

Me: *"How come your projects have been mostly successful?"*

Jead: *“I maintain very good relationships with everyone. I go sometimes to the extreme of giving some freebies in projects to gain a user, because I know that I will need him or her later in the project. My incentive is to finish the project before the target date, as this translates into more profits and hence a higher bonus for me.”*

Me: *“But isn’t this what all project managers should do?”*

Jead: *“Frankly, whenever I feel that a project could be problematic after meeting the users at customer sites, I draw my own risk assessment. If I am able to manage it, I go about it silently and spend relentless hours to make it happen. If I feel that the project risks are much more than what is usually the case compared to other projects, I immediately tell the Services Director, the HR manager and the vice presidents. If the customer does not comply with my practices, I will keep on nagging everyone in ITCO. What happens, in my view, is that the vice presidents listen to the Services Director and ignore my complaints. The Services Director puts pressure on project managers until they stop complaining and somehow the accountability, as to who decided to continue with the project, gets lost. Vice presidents assume that the Services Director is on top of the projects and thereafter the reports do not show the real risks that projects are in.”*

Jead claimed to support the program, but he believed that his own practices and methods had proven more successful.

I also tried to talk project management through with Edmaz, ITCO’s services director. Edmaz had been recruited as a senior project manager joining ITCO in June 2008. He had worked in Canada for the past five years. He returned to the UAE with a focus on making money; his debts in Canada were over a hundred thousand dollars. Many of the vice presidents were happy with Edmaz’s performance. He was therefore promoted to services director. After noticing that the workshops did not generate the expected results, and that the project managers had gone back to using their old methods, I asked Edmaz to reflect on the past few months. Here is what he had to say:

“People in general in this region like to take personal credit and do not care about their company’s well-being. Why? Because employment relations are not stable in general; people move from one organization to another in a split second if only the package offer is better. They also know that they can get fired at any time; therefore, loyalty does not exist or is minimal. The workshops, for

them, are valuable for adding new skills to their resumes, and frankly they never care about using them, even when you ask and try to emphasize their importance. I get the feeling that people did not see any personal gain by implementing any of it, and personal gain here means more money. In Canada people also have the 'I know this better' and 'This is the way it should be done' kind of attitude, but people fear being fired. Maintaining a job in Canada means paying the mortgage and jobs are not that plenty, so people implement on orders from above. Things get done, but of course they may take more time and not always meet set objectives."

I reflect and ponder: how could the field of management have come to this? I ask myself, how and what could drive people to deliver actual and real results? How can a manager measure the intentions and actions of the collective? Even if managers could lead with strong gestures in few moments of interaction, how could we capture the subtle processes of daily interaction that happen with words, body language, eye contact and the feelings throughout the whole year? Can managers really manage the collective in a command and control manner without understanding the ideologies, beliefs and engaging in constant dialogue with employees?

After the Five Gear model meeting in late 2005, Fadi, had asked me to meet him in his office to discuss the progress on projects. During our conversation few interesting events happened that opened up my mind to consider a new initiative at ITCO.

Fadi asks me about Viken's presentation, and I say, *"It was impressive and colorful."*

Fadi nods, *"An impressive show."*

I ponder for a moment then ask: *"Do you believe in that kind of management?"*

(This was an important question for me, as I am always portrayed as a pessimist, so I wanted to know whether others felt the same skepticism as I did.)

Fadi replied, *"Unless someone cares to implement on the ground, and engages with others, these frameworks or models cannot deliver."*

Fadi receives a call from his assistant that his guests are waiting in the reception area. Fadi asks me to stay. He welcomes the guests and we move to sit around the conference table in the room. Fadi whispers to me that these executives have come from Europe offering SECURAL representation to ITCO (several security-based products).

"Meet Samir," says Fadi. "We were talking just now about frameworks and management models."

Fadi asks Ricard, the vice president of SECURAL, his opinion on frameworks and models, and Ricard answers, *"Most of today's frameworks in use are based on a model where individuals are considered to be a system and the organization is considered to be a separate system, and where the CEO or senior managers are to use some kind of cause-and-effect analysis or a command and control framework to get results. It all follows a form of modernism from the books of management gurus we are taught at universities, but in Europe we seem to have moved away from these models and we are embracing some kind of a postmodern view. I think models can blind managers as they fail to consider people's true meanings during interactions. I have stopped thinking in terms of cause and effect, unless a situation really requires it. However, I do engage in dialogue and interaction, questioning every possible aspect."*

Someone else says, *"Mostly I think we know what to do as managers. The systems management thinking just makes us unnecessarily insecure. I listen carefully, respond thoughtfully, and question assumptions. I truly believe I have had as much experience and read as much as any other manager. We read and get ideas from other people, but we put them together in our own way, tailoring them to the situation And if we can't decide what to do, we confer with each other... It is fun."*

"What do you mean when you say you do not use the conventional tools?" Fadi asks.

"Well, we don't entertain the myth that systems management entails trying to find solutions through prescribed frameworks or models. I have stopped pretending to myself that I am following any grand narrative or theory on how to manage."

A few people nod. I find myself nodding.

Fadi finds himself defending the use of frameworks: *"Well, I still use some frameworks, but I do it just occasionally."*

One of the guests interrupts Fadi, *"We don't mean to say that you shouldn't use frameworks. I think we all use some models some of the time. We recognize that this is a great field we are in; we have learned a lot, and we believe in what we do, but no theory, all by itself, seems to hold water, so we join hands to try to cope, and try to figure out our way forward."*

Ricard comments, *"If you try to apply any framework to every person and every situation, it becomes just too simplifying. We maintain a little looseness in the way we work."*

Maybe I can help ITCO to achieve more 'looseness' in their thinking by asking management to look at situations from many angles and not to be stuck in just one paradigm. Another, much more modest, intervention took place. Professor Hugo from Holland met with the management team. If Bruno could not order them to communicate more openly, could Hugo seduce them? Hugo retold the story of the fall of the Dutch bank ABN AMRO based on Jeroen Smit's (2008) book *De prooi* (*The Perfect Prey*, (Smit, 2009)), annotated by his own experiences with bad management that was unable to connect with people and circumstances. Hugo tried to cajole management to talk about itself and its actions. In effect, his question was: *"How do we relate to each other and to our circumstances when we are challenged?"* Storytelling was meant to evoke and provoke the managers.

Hugo began telling the story of how egocentrism – being over-concerned with one's own power and self-interest – had driven ABN AMRO into bankruptcy. As a result, the Dutch government had nationalized the Dutch parts of the bank to prevent its complete failure. The managers were asked to reflect on the failure of operations and what that can lead to. The story was meant as a provocation.

Hugo: *"So what do you think of the story?"*

Edmaz: *"I do not know ABN AMRO so well; I know that they have a branch or used to have a branch here in the UAE. Many banks fail these days and no one knows really why."*

Elias: *“The context is different in the UAE. No bank ever failed, they (the government) will not allow a bank to fail. It will cause chaos, lack of confidence and embarrassment to the rulers.”*

Sesh: *“I have noticed that many people in the UAE do not pay much attention to what happens in other places.”*

When Hugo tried to push the managers to think about business disasters, change and managing in a crisis, the conversation took a different direction:

Edmaz: *“I live in Canada and we do not see the same stories over there. I have worked in many consulting firms and I bring knowledge to ITCO. I came here because I cannot make the same money in Canada. I have two kids who have started very early using the Web to show their work (designing games) and make money.”*

Sesh sat silently with not much to say. Elias, preoccupied with his phone, commented:

“In the past similar cases happened here in the UAE, I’m not sure if there is much an individual can do.”

Hugo tried to get them relate their stories to ITCO and its future, but it was almost impossible to get a conversation going. Hugo was frustrated; as he describes it: *“It was like a dance, I wanted to Tango and they were willing to Waltz, but only half-time.”* The managers did not relate to each other, or perhaps better said, ‘they related to each other as not relating to each other’. The collective ‘We’ (Mead, 1934) just wasn’t there – or was in denial.

Hugo had confronted ITCO’s managers with the challenges the global financial crisis brought with it, expecting them to oppose or agree with potential actions. But the managers did not form a group of discussion or respond with a common view. ITCO’s managers do not work together as a ‘we’, as a team, or as a group. They remain individuals. One or another may be willing to speak, but only as a monad with his personal history. There seemed to be no: ‘We planned this project’, ‘We will implement these new ideas’, and ‘We are responsible.’ The ‘we’, or working as a collective, did not seem to get them what they wanted, and hence they reverted to the ‘I’ to fulfill their expectations.

Hugo came away from the session pessimistic about ITCO's chances of responding to crisis. Dialogue enables individuals with conflicting views to reflect on the views of others; it opens us to questioning established assumptions, doubting the validity of simple claims to 'truth', and highlights the multiplicity of action. Or as Bakhtin writes: "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 61). In their hyper-capitalist context, ITCO's managers seemed each, to only be interested in his own views.

Improving project delivery in such a hyper-individualist setting is nearly impossible. Since ITCO's profits are recognized only when a project is successfully completed, projects and their implementation really ought to be central to everyone. In order to deliver projects, team effort is needed. Groups need to be formed where each group, including those at customer sites and those in the back office, come together to help to deliver on-time to recognize the desired profits. But blinded by their past successes at selling, the managers and consultants seemed to be blind to their limitations and to the destructive consequences of their attitudes. Success had made the people all the more prone to protect their self-interests.

But the context changed – the economic crisis hit and then things seemed different. The situation started to get worse; banks were cutting on their facilities to companies and ITCO and its sister companies had almost with no cash. Salaries were late, employees were resigning. I spent hours every day on the phone and in every occasion my advice was to do whatever was possible; from cutting costs, to closing down some offices and firing redundant employees, just to reach a stable cash position. I had conducted a financial diagnosis and knew that their financial ratios were way off from any standard, and I knew that it would be very difficult to fix such discrepancies in a short period.

But to my surprise, few of my proposals were implemented and ITCO continued on its same course. Chris, the director of operations, seemed convinced that my advice made sense and did start to implement. Was this a different Chris? He barely used to consider my proposals. Had Chris changed? Chris in my opinion was an opportunistic person. He wanted to reach a high position as quickly as possible. As the crisis arrived, he adopted the slogan 'If there is no pain, then

there is no change.’ To my surprise ITCO was becoming more attentive to my advice. But still there was no action on the ground. Chris seemed to be the only person that was acting and implementing. He seemed very convinced. I had helped to recruit Chris when I was still at Oracle. He was, then, the sales support for Oracle’s e-Business suite of products. Chris comes over as astute and humorous. He has good critical thinking skills and is liked by most customers. Chris moved to ITCO in 2002. In 2008 he was appointed Director for operations after Remas, ITCO’s then Director resigned. At that time, there were few options to find a replacement, and Chris seemed a reasonable choice. I always felt that Chris wanted to prove himself. During his Oracle tenure he did not achieve his targets and while at ITCO he only met his targets once, in 2007. I always thought that he lacked skills and knowledge in business management. But he did try very hard to read books and to understand the management literature. But Chris had always tried at ITCO to ignore my advice and he would not engage in substantial discussion with me. So our relationship had become rather cold. But Chris rather suddenly was engaging in conversation and interaction, which gave me a feeling of satisfaction. Now that he was better informed about the company’s business, its finances and how the operations worked, he sounded more confident. I also was more open to ask Chris questions that had always concerned me. I wanted to know how good a consultant I was. What were my strengths and weaknesses? How could I improve myself and my practices?

Chris: “There is no doubt that if I had listened to you a long time back, and understood your vision more, both I and ITCO would have been in a better position today. What does this also mean? It means that regardless of the integrity of the advice, the WAY it is communicated and the WAY it is presented, and WAY you try to convince people with your advice, remains an issue. So you should ask yourself, ‘Why aren’t they listening to me?’ ‘Why aren’t they acting upon my recommendations?’ It’s true that humans by nature and especially us here in the region don’t like to take advice, we probably move too slowly and are sluggish implementers, yet I believe your means of delivering your message needs to be much more aggressive and convincing (not because they actually aren’t, but because this is how people are here) this is something I even say to myself.”

Me: “Have you changed in any of your beliefs or values at ITCO? Did I have a role?”

Chris: *“There have been changes across various aspects of my work from Sales to Marketing to People Skills to Communication and recently and most importantly Finance and Administration processes and best practices. In terms of changing my views, since you have been part of my professional journey for the past 10 years, I really don’t know if it was you or life and its experiences that have surely changed so many of my views in life. However there a few things that definitely came from you; building the ability to understand people and work with them according to their potential without any excessive higher expectations, and reading and learning by experimenting. Now that you ask, I suddenly regret that I didn’t take more notes during these past 10 years!”*

Me: *“Is it that people tend to take advice but do not want to admit or give credit for it?”*

Chris: *“Personally you have had a big impact on the way I think, implement, govern and strategize for the future. To elaborate, a bit, I can remember being admonished to always be professional and respect the conduct of business, it will always play in your favor, always base any judgment or decision on solid facts, a story is the best way to teach anything, it will never be forgotten. Indeed I remember so many stories.”*

Chris’s points on how to convey the message are probably correct. The people around me at ITCO are not pragmatic; they are emotional and expect the message to be immediate, direct and personal. You do not ‘tell it as it is’ but leave the listener to articulate it. As for the rest of the vice presidents, they were still ‘stuck’ and there was no action. They shied away from questioning their assumptions or ITCO’s business model; they just wanted to preserve the status quo. Chris met with the vice presidents almost daily. I wanted to know what was happening, so I asked him about how he would explain the inaction:

“To be honest, and I hope you can keep this confidential, the vice presidents seem very lost. We are very vaguely updated about the true status of the company and its future. One of the vice presidents is in a panic-y and depressed mode, to an extent that all employees, including me, are getting scare. It is a very unproductive mode. Rather than being the leader, when needed the most, he’s just not there. Employees are actually mocking his reactions to the situation; even the market has realized that he is far gone. ITCO’s future is very unclear, one day they want to close it, another day they want to minimize it, another they want to merge it, and last but not least, they want to sell it. None of which is happening, all we do is talk, meet and discuss with no action

proposals, no owners present, and not one single action or even plan has been agreed upon. The guys' future is here, and ITCO's future, personally speaking, is threatened, they don't want to change the model and everyone knows it must be changed."

I expected that the 'pain' ITCO was experiencing would at least make the managers and vice presidents more open to engage in new ideas. It seemed as if past success was overshadowing any new gesture or dialogue. Was this nostalgia at its most destructive?

ITCO and the Global Financial Crisis

On December 13th of 2009, as I sat in the business lounge at Schiphol Airport, I reflected on my experience with my previous assignments in Abu Dhabi with ITCO. After suffering losses from ailing projects in the UAE and the Persian Gulf region in the past years, ITCO's executives undertook a detailed review of its business strategy in 2004 and concluded that its current organization structure and project implementation processes required change. I was the consultant hired to assess the situation and to make recommendations.

My initial assessment had been that ITCO was succeeding in growing yearly revenues, and that executives and managers acted professionally at conducting their daily operations, but that profits, and margins on projects, were low. A simple comparison with a nominal bank rate of return on investment showed that ITCO's shareholders were not maximizing their opportunity costs. In fact, if ITCO accounted for the risks factors associated with the delivery of IT projects in the UAE and the Persian Gulf region, ITCO might not be creating any value to its shareholders at all. By using simple valuation models, such as discounted cash-flow or asset-value models, ITCO's net worth seemed stagnant for the last ten years. The problem as I then conceived of it was related to delivering IT implementation projects on time and on budget. ITCO's managers did not focus on maintaining project profitability, nor were they focused on managing customer sites in terms of their consultants delivering per project plans and raising alerts if projects faltered. ITCO had several hundreds of consultants and employees. Since most of the projects were delivered at customer sites, there

were managers at the customer sites and there were other (more senior) managers at the home offices.

My initial questions were related to economic performance; in particular, in terms of ITCO's profitability and project delivery. Was there a need to re-train managers to gain new practices? Should the managers adopt best-practices in managing the service delivery process? At the time, I had learned to use frameworks on change management and strategy from authors like Senge (2003), Kotter (1996), Lewin (1951), Bridges (2003) and Collins (2002). And I was convinced that implementing some of the normative ideas and frameworks in these books could improve the situation at ITCO.

As I was getting ready to board my next flight, I felt puzzled and enraged about the lack of progress that the company had achieved during the last years. From 2004 to 2010 several change initiatives were implemented with the objective of improving project delivery. By early 2010, ITCO was running out of cash, struggling to pay its suppliers and employees. I lived and re-lived the activities and behaviors of ITCO's owners, managers and executives in my head, trying to understand how the largest IT company in the UAE could find itself in such a difficult situation, after having grown from a mere forty million dollars of revenue to over eight hundred million dollars in less than twenty years. As I watched other planes take off at the airport, I wondered why there was such a gap between what the managers and executives said they ought to be doing, and what I knew they actually were doing.

The constant pattern of managers and executives repeating previous practices, despite investment in new management initiatives and new training, had led me to question my interpretations of ITCO and its stakeholders. Some questions centered on whether ITCO, to start with, was created to make a profit. In the UAE money has (perhaps) no real value to people who possess an unlimited amount of it. Was ITCO owned for power, prestige or spectacle? What in effect is the nature of ITCO as an organization? Were my assumptions about what counted as rational and ethical in business really possible or relevant in ITCO?

My plane landed that day in Abu Dhabi. A taxi took me straight to ITCO's offices. As I walked through the corridors to meet ITCO's president, I noticed that the offices were mostly empty. I met few managers in the corridor; I noticed wondering faces. As the financial economic crisis had unfolded in 2009, the

chaos had created difficult and complex conditions for ITCO. It was difficult to predict what the next weeks or months would bring. The president informed me that the banks had stopped lines of credit and that they were only sure of covering salaries for a few months. Vendors and suppliers had stopped supplying IT products as payment had been delayed. Sales patterns had become unpredictable. The vice president of sales, always optimistic, said: *“No matter how chaotic the situation is, and no matter how much staff attrition happens, new sales and projects are always there.”* The president commented, *“His proverbial faucet cannot be turned off”* pointing to Fadi the vice president of sales. But ITCO had never had enough cash on hand to last more than few months, but it had managed to achieve revenues around a billion dollars, every year for the last three years.

That day I met Jan, the Human Resources and Administration head (HRA), who had made every effort possible to implement change programs during the past few years. During the organizational change management (OCM) program, I had worked with all levels of managers, championing the implementation of new practices and processes to enhance the delivery of projects. Jan was happy to see me again, but felt sad that no one, executives in particular, had really taken the OCM program seriously. Jan thought that the crisis in was affecting everyone and was not sure of any progress.

ITCO managers were awarded bonuses for achieving their revenue and performance targets. I thought they would feel like shareholders and hence want to increase shareholder value. In fact, ITCO did post yearly, internal pro forma profits, but the total net profit remained the same year after year. Up to the last minute, people in ITCO were confident that the crisis would not hit the UAE. Business was growing and projects were still coming in. I remember speaking to several vice presidents at ITCO, to consider potential scenarios in case the financial situation changed. But they insisted that nothing would happen in the UAE. I sent emails again and again to the vice president of sales, asking him to consider alternatives and options, just in case the economic crisis got bigger. But I kept on getting the same response: ‘Everything is fine here.’ I started to believe them, as nothing much was being said about the UAE or the Persian Gulf region on the news.

I had thought that normative management principles and best-practice concepts and frameworks would succeed in ITCO. But the outcomes left me puzzled. Behavior in practice did not seem to be governed by what people said they ought to do. While the vice president and president of ITCO continually emphasized their desire to increase effectiveness by stimulating responsibility, governance and profit growth, not much seemed to get done. The outcomes of ITCO appeared puzzling. Profit making in business literature is considered a natural activity of individual action driven by rational considerations. But in Abu Dhabi one was faced by fiction-like stories of multimillion-dollar deals closed in days, and management practices such as kickbacks and other forms of corruption. In UAE hypermodernity, networking, marketing, and display dominate. The appearance of performativity is sought as the end purpose; but does performance still count?

I worked to improve project profitability and to change the 'I do not care' attitude of many. My strategic objective was for ITCO's managers to assume responsibility and accountability for their actions and to make ITCO profitable.

Having lived in the UAE for several years, I understood that the social structure of an expat society formally in the service of the local nationals is very divisive. From 1998 to 2008, IT companies made fortunes for their founders and shareholders and at an ever increasingly speed. Organizations' and employees' behavior displayed a self-interested attitude of 'I don't care' linked to a lack of reflexivity and unwillingness to experiment. Such behavior invites you to question the rationality and irrationality of practice.

Between the beginning of 2004 and late 2010 I spent in total about two years and a half in the UAE. That time was spent in ITCO and that is where the information in this chapter comes from. In the beginning ITCO was implementing several change management initiatives, using standard Western change management methods. These methods followed a common American framework, the so-called ADKHAR method, which based on Kotter (1996). Using the method, strategies were developed with ITCO, stakeholder analyses were conducted, and communication plans were implemented. The change initiatives targeted the organizational structure to improve project delivery. They included re-structuring the services division to achieve better accountability and implementing new project management practices. Being

engaged in the OCM program allowed me to document, investigate, analyze and understand ITCO, its owners, executives and managers, and how they reacted to change management interventions.

I thought that sticking to a normative paradigm of achieving better performance would result in augmenting and maximizing my income as well. But in 2010 I realized that I was the only loser. From the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis, until my last visit to ITCO in 2010, I was surprised and puzzled to find out that the executives and managers had benefited enormously and had hoarded millions of dollars, while ITCO as an organization was insolvent. I had assumed that downsizing ITCO, by letting go of three hundred employees, would save ITCO millions of dollars, helping to cover its bank debts and to regain its position in the marketplace. Leading ITCO out of its mess would leave me, I thought, with some lucrative consulting fees.

But the banks never foreclosed on ITCO or any of its stakeholders, nor did the UAE national owner regain his losses, nor did executives get lower compensation. The banks were told by a member of the ruling family to back off; where upon lines of credits were restored. I was willing to be a 'bad guy' by firing three hundred or more employees. The three hundred or more employees left ITCO voluntarily in 2011 to find better salaries and bonuses elsewhere. ITCO's executives were seen to be good managers, paying their dues to their employees.

During my visit to Abu Dhabi in 2009 I stayed at ITCO's guesthouse. The guesthouse is a three-story villa used to accommodate managers and consultants visiting from outside Abu Dhabi. I wanted to spend more time with the managers in an informal setting to be able to understand the 'shadow side of the organization' and to meet the managers' when they were not at a customer site or inside the company. Most of the managers seemed happy enough with my presence as it allowed them to get to know me better and to speak their minds on issues that were important to them. During my six-week stay at the guesthouse, we talked about: the UAE and its progress, their performance in projects, their overall (dis-)satisfaction with ITCO, and issues that troubled them. The residents would meet in the main sitting area and start conversation with jokes about each other and their customers. The discussions would then begin to take a more serious tone.

There was agreement that in Abu Dhabi everything was very artificial and that there was no foundation for the rampant housing speculation. They had all received calls from real estate agents and banks urging them to invest in apartments under construction with promises of enormous profits once the buildings were completed. But they felt that it was worth taking chances to cash in as others had. They were wanted to take advantage of what the UAE had to offer. Living in a boom economy supposedly could be satisfying. Almost everyone was obsessed with making (more) money and aspired to live it up. They all complained about their standard of living. Several felt detached from ITCO and expressed interest in trying to find a new job that paid better. One of them was one of the best project managers at ITCO who I found had always showed commitment and loyalty by working after hours and completing his projects on time. But he also wanted out if he could earn more elsewhere. There were some who were less enthusiastic about taking risks and experimenting; they reported that they saw the UAE as an entertainment-like experience.

It did not take long for them to open up and share their stories of what they had done in the past and where they would like to be in five years' time. Some of the discussion even lasted until four o'clock in the morning. Sometimes there was conflict and sometimes there was shouting. It was during those moments, that especially valuable information came out.

Everyone talked about their grievances with their countries of origin. They all mentioned how their countries' governments were corrupt and that they could not trust anyone. They recounted many stories of how 'wasta' is constantly used to get what one wants and that only those in power enjoyed the riches of their country, while they had to travel abroad to make a living. They would perceive any new project or initiative in their home country with skepticism, and would be cynical about it. They had an attitude of mistrust and distrust. They seemed to understand ITCO and everything around them in terms of their experiences in their homelands. Their observations of the behavior of others with more money than themselves were entirely cynical.

They repeatedly told how many times ITCO's executives had broken promises or had not delivered on commitments. Most were either resentful or indifferent about accepting new work practices or management initiatives. They were not committed to making ITCO operate more successfully. But they were serious

about their careers and titles. They continuously talked about how the UAE provided fertile ground for anyone seeking higher positions and compensation. A few mentioned that their resumes were posted with several agencies, and that it was just a matter of how much they were offered for them to jump ship. When I claimed that ITCO executives really wanted to enhance work practices and effectiveness, they all laughed. No one was really interested in firm strategy or planning, but they kept on asking whether I knew if salary raises would be coming that year or not.

Everyone claimed that ITCO was a business in a dynamic industry where profitability was an important goal. The concept of profit meant different things to different stakeholders. For the expats, managing profit generating companies, at least as per the audited income statements, was a means to earn higher bonuses. In the cynical words of a chief accountant at ITCO: *“On paper there is a number, but can this number be reality? [It] is almost impossible.”* For the national owner, profits meant that he could draw money from the company’s bank account, comparable to his share of the profits. For the banks it meant that they could extend additional credit to the company and in many cases increase the rate of return as the credit ceiling and acceptable risk level is raised.

I knew of receivables and collection delays and about the difficult cash situation. Despite my requests to study ITCO’s accounts, I was never given direct access to them, except for summaries and supporting documents to the balance sheet. Numbers in company accounts are only numbers, and unless you can link them to the actual processes, you cannot make sense of what is really going on. I wanted to understand the intricacies of why cash and receivables were problematic and to advise ITCO on steps they could take to improve on their position.

I did discover that sales revenue as a percentage of total revenue had been increasing, while sales and margins from services had been decreasing. ITCO was acquiring new products to sell through new vendors as a means to maintain and increase revenues. To deliver the required services that usually accompany the sales of IT products, the president remarked, *“We have given considerable thought to the company’s underlying concept of having a diverse, multilingual consulting team from different countries to cater for a similar diversity at customer projects.”* The services ITCO sold were described as being delivered

efficiently and effectively, in order to maintain profits and satisfy customers, but in fact there were no profits from services.

By the end of 2009, the global financial crisis had still not hit the UAE, or at least it was not publicly admitted or spoken about. I tried to advise ITCO's executives on the need to prepare for what the crisis could lead to. They were not concerned, as sales revenues were still growing. However, easy credit facilities were drying up. Customers and the UAE government started being late in their payments. However, government officials were still encouraging people to invest in the real estate market, as if nothing was wrong.

I was frustrated that ITCO's executives were not taking my advice seriously about how the Global crisis would affect ITCO. I was not sure how solid ITCO's financing was. But I had a feeling that ITCO's cash position was not really that good, as many employees complained of salaries being paid late.

In August 2009, I had discussed with Fadi, vice president of sales, about the current situation in North America, and the fact that the financial crisis seemed to be hitting hard in other countries. I urged Fadi to think of establishing some contingency plans, in case the crisis hit the UAE and Persian Gulf region. His reply was:

“You worry always so much; you should be in the UAE (and not in Canada); you are not in touch with senior executives specially locals [meaning UAE nationals]; they tell me that all is well and that a similar crisis happened before, and the UAE remained immune to it.”

My email warnings were replied to, thus: *“ITCO is doing well; we are selling even more than before.”* When I explained to the president that the income statement did not show real growth in profits, he replied:

“You always come to us with ‘theorie’s and you ignore the situation we are in. The market is moving very fast and we need to outgrow the market to stay number the number one company. We do not have much time to spare for theories.”

While conducting a ratio-analysis on ITCO's financials, I had discovered that the TIE ratio (times interest earned) was 1.9, a ratio above the 1.0 normal. This

meant that ITCO was paying interest equal to its net income. Best practice on this ratio is less than 1.0.

Late October 2009, I got a call from the ITCO's president who was concerned because some customers were not able to meet their obligations to ITCO and that the cash situation was deteriorating very fast. I mentioned the need to look into cutting un-needed staff and to look at expenses with a focus on cutting costs. On November 2nd 2009, I flew back to the UAE and spent four weeks conducting a financial analysis of ITCO, trying to locate potential savings and cost reductions.

As I sat in my hotel, late at night, I read the Toronto Star on-line¹³:

“Just a year after the global downturn derailed Dubai’s explosive growth, the city is now so swamped in debt that it’s asking for a six-month reprieve on paying its bills—causing a drop on world markets Thursday and raising questions about Dubai’s reputation as a magnet for international investment. The fallout came swiftly after Wednesday’s statement that Dubai’s main development engine, Dubai World, would ask creditors for a ‘standstill’ on paying back its \$60 billion (U.S.) debt until at least May. . . . Dubai became the Gulf’s biggest casualty of the global credit crunch a year ago. But its key leader had continually dismissed concerns over the city-state’s liquidity and claims it overreached during the good times. When asked about the debt, he confidently assured reporters in a rare meeting two months ago that ‘we are all right’ and ‘we are not worried’, leaving details of a recovery plan—if such a plan exists [emphasis added]—to everyone’s guess. . . . After months of denial that the economic downturn even touched the glitzy city-state, the Dubai government earlier this year showed signs of trying to deal with the financial fallout that has halted dozens of projects and touched off an exodus of expatriate workers.”

It seemed as if the unbounded expansion had created the conditions of its own destruction. I attempted to prepare a financial analysis of ITCO to better understand its financial situation. But I needed more detailed data than ITCO's financial department would provide. I made a few recommendations, which included: the creation of a task force from all departments to monitor project progress on a daily basis making it possible to invoice customers as fast as

¹³ “Dubai debt 'standstill' raises alarms about image”. The Associated Press, Published Nov 26 2009. [http://www.thestar.com/\[30.11.2009\]](http://www.thestar.com/[30.11.2009]).

possible, and to start discussions with the local owner to explore selling ITCO's assets for cash.

For several months, thereafter, I kept sending alerts to the vice president of Finance and the president. To make my points clearer I set-up a website where management could log in, and study ITCO's results for the past five years. To my surprise, ITCO declared profits and earnings for the year with a growth of revenues exceeding 30%. But considering its lack of cash, I realized that collections could be an issue. After a thorough analysis with the chief accountant (a CPA – certified public accountant) from India, it became apparent that provisions for potential bad debt had never really been taken. When I confronted the president and vice president of finance with these results, they re-iterated that the external auditor was comfortable with the level of provision, and thus it was not an issue to be re-considered. The vice president of finance sent me a series of reports claiming that ITCO had assets that could cover its debts.

My next visit was in January 2010. By then there was no doubt that the financial crisis had 'arrived'. The panic of executives, as the crisis unfolded, raised questions about their past leadership. It was obvious that ITCO's executives and managers had failed to engage with the relevant issues and challenges.

The government stopped payments on its debts. International banks operating in the UAE closed down credit facilities and started pressuring ITCO for repayment. ITCO began to lose employees to competitors. The outlook started to look uncertain and performance lagged behind the budget. By the middle of 2010, the company was in an even worse situation. But still not a single contingency plan was in evidence to decrease costs and/or to raise cash. When I asked why, executives responded: *"Rumors that our financial situation is bad could travel fast, causing banks to limit their credit facilities even more, and customers might cancel orders or stop buying from us."* But in fact many already knew of ITCO's problems but ITCO's executives were in full denial. The pace of change in ITCO did not reflect the urgency of the crisis.

Many companies, including government-owned ones, started to default; a few private companies actually closed their doors. Those owned by nationals, like ITCO, were left to find any solution they could for their financial situation. ITCO's executives started blaming each other: whose fault was it that ITCO had

no cash or reserves? Meanwhile, the banks increased their pressure on ITCO to repay their loans.

The vice president of Sales at ITCO wrote me:

“Your suggestions are not possible. We cannot just cut budgets and fire people to reduce costs. The suggested financial and business model you propose is complex. There is no time or anyone to implement any such thing. Every executive seems to blame the others. The major problem is that I am too busy to work on this alone. I am drowned with the daily operations and with trying to keep the big projects afloat. Please help me.”

I became convinced that ITCO needed one of the big five consulting firms to help them out of their mess. It took me several weeks before the president of ITCO agreed to get a third party to look into a turnaround for ITCO. In October 2010, I was given the mandate to seek turnaround consultants to help ITCO negotiate its way out of its (near) insolvency and to restructure its accumulated debt, as the banks in the UAE froze the credit facilities, leaving hundreds of companies in a crunch situation.

DT, a leading big five consulting firm, was selected by ITCO’s national owner and the majority of ITCO’s executives. DT was also the main advisor to the Dubai government in regards to its one hundred and twenty billion dollars of debt. DT brought with them an expertise in turnaround management, but most importantly they understood the reality of the UAE, its relationship model, its banking system, the political environment and how decision-making took place in the local corporate culture.

CHAPTER 3

From 'ME' to Habitus

In this chapter, social studies theory is applied to understand the case study. A 'modernist' theory is used. It is critical theory, but still 'modernist'. By that I mean that it is theory that implicitly assumes that social reality makes sense and that by analytically examining it, one can make sense of events. Firstly, I examine the social construction of identity. The social self of ITCO, formed via the collective identity of excess, has been my subject matter throughout. What sort of identity does the economy of excess produce? What happens in business if scarcity recedes into insignificance? Social self is a matter of accountability, of giving account of oneself to self and others. If there is no account and no story, there is no (or little) self. Accountability can be cast as repressive, as enforced self-justification; but no accountability may be equally perverse. What sort of identity remains without responsibility? Thus, using Mead things that happened to identity in ITCO are examined.

Ultimately this investigation is not psychological, though it is somewhat social psychological. This book is more 'economic anthropology' researched in an organizational studies context than social psychological. Self and identity are important because my actants, their setting and the organization studied, are all unimaginable without it. However, ultimately, the research object is the organization without scarcity, or the organization of excess, as it occurred in ITCO.

Thus I move on from Mead to Bourdieu, from identity to habitus. The organization of excess is a habitus; it is a shared social way of existing and thus

Bourdieu's key concept brings me very close to my object of study. However, an analysis based on types of capital takes the persons out of the context. With Bourdieu I gain insight into the structure of the force-field wherein ITCO exists, but the insight is bought at the price of losing sight of the people, identities and experience.

My attempted analysis within analytical modernism reveals aspects of how identity operated in ITCO as well as how it was grounded in the social force-field, but these analyses bring me to a very static form of insight. ITCO can be understood as put together from social constructed identities, which are grounded in forms of capital, but this insight is bought at the cost of reifying ITCO. ITCO is cast as an object with certain mechanical workings. I gain a sort of understanding, but I lose what I experientially found interesting, namely the living relatedness of the story. Thus, I present my modernist analysis below, but I signal that I will want to try to go further (in Chapter 4) to attempt to paint a more dynamic picture.

What ITCO Does to 'ME'

I will now explore what G.H. Mead's concepts and theory of the self and action reveal about ITCO or in other words *what ITCO does to me or to you?* In the case of Bruno, detailed in the previous chapter, ITCO confronted him with an identity crisis as he tried to defend his 'generalized other' of 'I am valuable,' 'I am professional,' 'I know what I am doing,' and 'this is truth', while his practices and tools were not really valuable in ITCO. ITCO refuted his professionalism and confronted him with a different truth: 'I am not effective,' and 'It is out of my control.' Even when his control could have been good for ITCO, Bruno was unable get a grip on the object (i.e. ITCO). In the case of Hugo, his use of provocative storytelling to incite dialogue also failed. He was confronted with an ITCO whose managers refuse to engage in social relatedness.

I wish to extend Mead's notion of the self, to show how the dynamics in a hyper-capitalist context, lead managers to individualistic practice. In my case, I had several encounters with ITCO that confronted me with my own identity. ITCO did not really want you to get a grasp on it or to control it; its people did not want anyone to control them; rather they wanted to continue practicing and

doing what they had always done to satisfy their own individual interests. In the section that follows, I make use of symbolic interaction and the views of George Herbert Mead to the study of myself, ITCO and the two other interventionists. Mead touches on meaning, social action and the construction of the self. These concepts help us better understand the micro interactions and reactions of individuals when faced with ITCO's paradoxes and conflicts.

George H. Mead's Account of the Self

Symbolic Interactionism (SI) is a sociological perspective that examines how individuals interact in a group setting, focusing on identity creation through interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Mead (1934) developed a theory of sociality that encompassed dynamic processes, change and emergence. For Mead the 'social act' is the basis of meaning-construction. Through action, we not only reinforce the taken-for-granted social structure that we share, but we also test, reflect, and creatively reconstruct meaning. Mead (1938) suggests that, with the 'becoming-of-self,' individual growth occurs via the seeking of new experiences. The person tries to understand what it feels like to live a life by constructing meaning as lived and experienced interactions. Understanding is strengthened by adopting a perspective that questions taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and ideologies.

In *Mind, Self and Society* (1934), published after his death and constructed from lecture notes of his students, Mead explores the social nature of the 'self.' As individuals, we fashion a sense of our own selfhood through interaction with other selves, using symbolic symbols. According to Mead, our 'selves' and those of others, exist through the meanings we construct from social action and mutual interactions: "the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process...since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also" (Mead, 1934, p. 135). Mead stressed 'significant symbols' that evoke the same response in the person making the gesture as in the respondent. Symbols are significant when they have meanings that are mutually accepted. Thus, if we are having a conversation

about the nature of organizations, we could draw on notions such as 'positivism', 'rules' and 'control' as significant symbols, in our effort to co-construct meaning. These are significant symbols, mediating our transactional processes of meaning-making, if we share a common understanding of what they mean. In the absence of such significant symbols, our interaction could be reduced to chaos and a series of mis-understandings. Interacting with significant symbols can, as long as the differences are not too big, offer the opportunity to explore distinctions in meanings attached to particular symbols. The ambiguities admit the possibility of new insights and learning.

Significant symbols allow us to stand in someone else's shoes during interaction, and to anticipate likely responses to our own 'moves'. For example, when I stand in front of a flip-chart, managers attending a meeting understand that I am about to explain something. But, this does not necessarily mean that all those attending will pay attention; although a significant symbol indicates the expected conduct in a social situation, individuals to a degree can make their own choices about how to react. However, even these choices are socially moderated by significant symbols. Mead explained this social regulation of conduct in terms of the 'generalized other', which is the organized system of significant symbols that reflects the generalized attitudes of the social group. Social habits of conduct are constituted as the generalized other.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the self is a social product. Mead makes a crucial distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' in conceptualizing the self. The 'me' is the socialized self, made up of the internalized attitudes of others, as already experienced. This embodied 'me' equates to habits of conduct that have been acquired reflexively through social interaction. The 'I', as Mead uses the term, is the unsocialized self, a set of personal desires and dispositions. The more spontaneous wants and wishes of the 'I' serve to distinguish the self from others, and can be said to inject something new, creative, and innovative into the social process. Self-awareness, Mead states, arises when the self is able to distinguish the 'me' from the 'I', and attain a level of reflective distance from the demands of society and culture. Mead stresses the continual social processes in which a person acquires a self, and a notion of the generalized.

The attitudes of the other players, which the participant assumes, organize into a sort of unit, and it is that organization which controls the response of the

individual. The illustration (is) of a person playing baseball. Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team; at least insofar as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We then get an 'other' which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process (Mead, 1934, p. 154).

The generalized other is the "organized social group which gives to the individual his [or her] unity" (Mead, 1934, p. 154). For Mead, the generalized other is "[a]ny thing – any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or animal, or merely physical – toward which he [the self] acts, or to which he responds" (Mead, 1934, p. 154). The 'I' responds to the generalized other in that the 'I' is the "answer the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him [or her] when he [or she] assumes an attitude toward them" (Mead, 1934, p. 177). We embrace some aspects of the generalized other and not all that the generalized other represents. Following Mead, the self and the generalized other are always in a process of articulating new experiences with other selves and other entities, which are more or less integrated into the generalized other.

Mead (1934) believed that meaning comes from experience and in particular from the consequences of one's actions mirrored back to the other. Through experience, the individual constructs meaning. The consequences of dealings with the world give the world its meaning. I - Me and Self are always changing, in a dynamic process in and through transactions with each other, and with other selves. Social action is understood in terms of interaction, gesture-response via significant symbols, and meaning-making, where interactions occur in real time, and at all levels of the social system. The 'I' is mediated by significant symbols; it has an inherently social quality. As such, society emerges out of interaction and shapes the self, but the self also shapes interaction. Change is a constant in the social process; unpredictable experience necessitates creative adaptation. According to Mead, the local situated gesture-response produces momentary concrete differences. These differences have the potential to develop into new patterns, producing coherence and the possibility of the new. The potential for change, in social interaction, depends on participant interaction. Hence, the willingness of people to participate in the conversation is an essential contributing element to create and articulate something new. These

elements of SI combine, providing a way of seeing social action as a dynamic process in meaning-making. They suggest how practice and social action shape identity and vice versa.

Turning to Bruno's role in ITCO, 'identity' a concept that has become increasingly popular within organizational studies (Alvesson, 2008), is crucial. When moving to a new location, individuals are challenged to reflect on who they are (Bengtsson, 2007). Attention to how identity is formulated, and the presentation of self, can offer insight into identity construction (Ybema, 2009). Individuals can compress part of their lives into moments of self-narration, stored as ready-made narratives to be drawn on to explain and represent their lives. Bruno insisted that someone like him was needed in order to resolve ITCO's problems. Using Mead's theory of the self and the act, Bruno tried to 'find himself' by positioning himself in the conflicts between competing forces, various interests and passions, swirling about him. He attributed a key role to himself and his knowledge and status. He believed that he could prevail by applying the same concepts and tools in consulting as he used to do so in Canada. Linear, pragmatic and rational models would define his identity. These qualities, he asserted, were universal and thus his status ought to be the same.

Bruno believed in solutions that lead to expected and predicted results. He was convinced that managers were inevitably motivated to take on new knowledge making their work easier by using the 'latest techniques.' The problem was to penetrate the status quo at ITCO. He blamed ITCO and its leadership (or lack thereof) for the failure of his methodology and the tools he offered. The sexist pun a couple of sentences back, of course, was intended. The consulting assignment was valued at more than \$8,000 USD, plus full expenses. This is much more than an independent consultant of his caliber normally earns in Canada. Bruno wanted to work in the UAE. He pushed hard to convince ITCO's executives that his consulting could generate profits.

Bruno's identity is deeply linked to the idea that the tools he brings are performative. He asserts that he is a successful consultant who knows his tools and methodologies and that ITCO should use his tools in every project as a way to resolve its project problems. But when his tools are not accepted, or do not deliver what they are to supposed to deliver, he gets frustrated, and instead of reflecting and admitting that he could not get the managers to use his tools and

methods, he puts the blame on ITCO and its managers. Bruno to a degree knows what is expected in his society. His generalized other is based on a highly pragmatic way of conducting business, which is in many respects the common way of living and working in Canada. He used in ITCO the same terminology of Cartesian and positivistic literature: 'root causes', 'planning', 'problem solving', 'solutioning', and 'managing processes and people' to mention but a few, as at home. His practices are grounded in Taylorism and the assumption of prescriptive deliverables, whereby change is planned, individuals can be separated from organizations, society and the 'other', and thus behavior can be rationalized. Bruno has embraced the importance of being successful, the need to be opportunistic, and the desire to apply performative tools.

Bruno had built a fairly narrow identity, which did not serve him very well under the changed circumstances of Abu Dhabi. In fact, his professional identity in general was insecure; his eagerness to do consulting in Abu Dhabi reflected his problems in getting assignments at home. His failure at ITCO could have prompted him to make changes in his identity. Here we see an interesting relationship between the 'me', of the Western generalized other, and the 'I'. When Bruno's tools failed him, the 'I' became defensive as he denies and blames. His 'stuckness' mirrored the 'stuckness' of ITCO, with no movement on either side. Bruno's two weeks in the UAE might have allowed him to question his (and other's) performance(s) (Goffman, 1959). In these terms, Bruno's performance was 'front stage' where he did not share a 'back stage' really with me, or as far as I could see, with anyone else.

On the intervention by Hugo, he believes that managers should be able to reflect on what they are doing, while they are doing it, and be able to articulate their experiences as a group. The managers, however, were focused on their own interests with no further display of social relatedness. The 'generalized other' had no truck with communicative openness or mutual social relatedness. Here the norms ignore the collective 'we' (Mead, 1934). Hugo ended up in a monologue for dialogue. But he had agreed to meet with the managers without an honorarium and to see the event as an experiment. His failure to achieve social relatedness with ITCO's top-brass did not destabilize his identity; principally because he had achieved a clear 'back-stage' with me and I shared the same failure of relatedness with ITCO's top management.

Behavior is usually governed by practical reason (Bourdieu, 1998). In contrast, collectivistic values emphasize harmony, sociability, and a willingness to put aside personal needs for the good of the group. The 'self' is consequently considered to be an aspect of the shared group identity (the generalized other). Neither individualistic nor collectivistic values should be considered inherently superior, but rather each is best depending on the context and cultural circumstances. In ITCO there was a shortage of cooperation, openness and shared willingness to correct mistakes. Individualism became selfishness and money was the primary measure of well-being. ITCO's managers and executives were blinded by their successes, which masked their limitations and the destructive consequences of their actions.

My objective at ITCO was to help managers and executives enhance their practices of governance and risk control, in order to deliver better performance at projects and, thereby, gain more assured profitability. I started with a modernist and normative organizational perspective, expecting people to work professionally, be responsible and accountable for their actions, and to create shared accountability among employees. The norm of maintaining accurate and true financial reporting, providing sustainable assets to face any volatile crisis, was unquestionable for me. I saw my task as providing substantive advice on the implementation of needed systems, and not just selling unnecessary solutions never to be used. At that time, ITCO's managers and executives seemed to live in a world of their own, where normal business practices and procedures did not factor. I believed that business was rational and profitability was socially necessary and beneficial. Amongst other things, the economic crisis since 2008 has changed all that. I am no longer so sure that business 'makes sense' and that business ethics is more than an oxymoron.

ITCO and its managers were whirling in a hyper-capitalist dream; they were able to make money easily, with no competition, no risk and no checks-and-balances. There was a mismatch between my modern perspective and the beliefs of ITCO's executives and managers. Was the UAE's hyper-real/hypermodern/hyper-capitalist climate to blame, or ITCO's managers, for promoting a culture of unlimited desire? Or is such a culture of desire really fundamentally attractive, though unattainable most of the time. I may have accurately represented how business is normally conducted, but were ITCO's executives really wrong to ignore the rules? Unlimited consumption, bigger

revenues, more assets and bigger organizations – it was marvelous as long as it lasted. Or was it? Managers were reporting 'creative' profits, and systematically mis-representing income and assets. But should we blame them, or conclude that it was all a product of a 'generalized other' of shared excess?

Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1989) was a favorite book of my youth. Of course his Algeria resembled my Lebanon. But more fundamentally, the book examines the individual without others or what happens when the 'generalized other' is inoperative. Camus speaks through Meursault, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know. I had a telegram from home: 'Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.' That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday." Meursault feels no need to create grief, as grief does not arise naturally. We are thrown into specific circumstances, where meaning exists only to the extent that it is created by the individual. Meaning is not a given in life; individuals are free to try to create meaning (or experience meaninglessness, as in *The Stranger*). One may not be totally free in one's daily interactions, but there is freedom to respond, confront or face the individual; there is freedom to create meaning in the immediate here-and-now of the moment. We are all born into a family, culture, nationality, religion (or none), or ethnic group; we are 'thrown into' them. *The Stranger* is the story of Meursault who lives in Algiers and faces unpredictable and uncertain events. At the very start, he is faced with the death of his mother, and he does not feel the grief others expect of him. He finds himself a stranger in his own social existence. He enters into a relationship with an Algerian girl, Marie, and with other characters that represent the society around him. Relations are disconnects. He is confused about the conflict between a meaningful existence on the one hand, and absurdity on the other. He has no standard from which to justify something as 'good' or 'bad'; everything depends on the context. As the plot unfolds, he gets into trouble; he commits murder and is put on trial. Meursault seems to be the exemplification of the unreflective man, who takes life for granted, and who is barely aware of his own thoughts and feelings. But during the second part of the novel, he becomes progressively aware of his existence, the nature of his freedom and choices, and his emotions. The book is about defining ourselves and what we stand for. There is no God or external standard of 'the Good' to refer to, and no sociological or psychological conditioning to blame. But in the end, we want to know whether we chose wisely. ITCO was populated by strangers. It was held together by money, and by little else. There were precious few beliefs acknowledged, shared

or expressed. Not being able to find solutions based on traditional concepts can provoke new forms of practice and ideas, the quest for individual meaning and, paradoxically, a desire to connect one's separate existence to the existence of others. This paradox, that each person is, on the one hand, an independent and unique self striving for meaning and purpose in a particular human life, yet on the other hand a relational, social self that depends on others to become more fully human, reflects in existentialism the universal tension of human coexistence. But ITCO was more a farce than a drama. The absurdity of meaninglessness was papered over with cash and existential crises were drowned in expensive wine and good food.

Mead's notion of the social self is helpful in explaining and representing the process that I have gone through while struggling to deal with ITCO. The formation of the 'self' is often bumpy. The struggle is primarily internal. It involves coming to terms with conflicts, new knowledge and choosing how meaning is integrated into the self. This does not mean 'self' formation is easy or successful, but it does mean that the individual makes choices and, for the most, communication is open between individuals and those who make up the generalized other.

Again, 'significant symbols' are those gestures that call out the same response in the gesturer as in the responder. They are significant because they embody meanings that are mutually accepted. I long assumed that systems' thinking was such a 'significant symbol' in business. The business is a web of relations where the whole is bigger than the parts and the whole thing falls apart if you start to amputate elements. But now companies move all sorts of things off-shore and out-source functions leaving themselves partial and dependent. The old rhetoric of: 'vision', 'command and control', 'strategy', 'performance', 'pride', 'wealth', 'optimization', 're-structuring' and 'frameworks' is passé for many. The common understanding of what these symbols meant has come and gone. For some they are relevant; for others they are now clichés. I still believe that the world and its interactions are all based on systems. The individual is a system. Organizations are systems. As systems, we analyze and respond to inputs and outputs. But meaning construction is an interactive process of sense-making, which for a long time I have insufficiently understood as mutually constituting interactions.

ITCO's managers and executives wanted to keep things as they were; I wanted to provoke change and experimentation. According to Mead, humans do not merely react in an instinctual manner but their reactions are based on past experience and their perception of the options that they have. The managers and executives wanted to maintain their high status and prestige. Following Mead, in their social actions they sought activities and symbols to maintain their standing. Their social meanings rotated around reputation and esteem. As one project manager commented:

“Everything in this country seems to revolve around who can make money faster and quicker. I have never seen so many luxurious cars such as Porsches and Ferraris in one small city. People want to be seen in these new luxury cars. They also want to be seen in the best restaurants. They sit and wave their hands to others, sitting around them.”

The generalized other centered on one's role in a hyper-capitalist game of easy money, no competition, few risks and no oversight. Under hyper-capitalism; the dynamics of success made people prone to protect their self-interest. My choices were ridden with a normative and modernist perspective seeking to maintain efficiency and productivity through social relatedness. My 'significant symbols' were out of step with those of the rest. What Mead would have designated the 'social act' entailed practices, actions and ideas bound to the tactics needed to gain acceptance by others in the UAE. Key past and anticipated consequences, leading to success, were always in most minds. In order to fulfill their desires and impulses, managers and executives had to acquire more and more projects and increase the cash flow. ITCO had to remain the largest IT company in the UAE. The owner, customers and employees thought that ITCO was growing, and would be able to remain solvent as its revenues increased. ITCO defined a 'generalized other' of its own. I could have shouted that the 'King had no clothes on', but nobody would have listened to me.

I sometimes struggled to articulate the contradictions and to bring ITCO back in line. But more often I rationalized my position by referring to doing 'the right thing' based on what my consulting clients wanted of me. The positivistic and reductionist meanings acquired during my MBA did not prepare me for the 'existential stranger's position'. I was trained to prioritize goals, and to organize and plan optimal actions. I tried to convince my listeners that the activities proposed would lead to positive results and, hence, were worth the effort. I came

across as 'loud' and extrovert, rather than introvert, because I preferred to be doing things and to find solutions which generated results. Nonetheless, my proposals were often unpopular and seen as time consuming and demanding hard work. They did not fulfill the managers' needs for status or prestige. The significant symbols of hard work and hard earned success were not received very well. ITCO's managers and executives signed almost every contract that sales could win. Growth and the number of projects were all that mattered.

Mead's concepts forced me to think reflectively. A new approach of 'who I am' and 'how the self is created' had revealed itself to me. I had been thrown into a specific circumstance where meaning existed only to the extent that it was created by the individuals around me. I found in myself a stranger believing in strict normative responsibility, in an environment of relativism. For most professionals in the UAE, 'If it looks good, it is good'. I found myself in a conflict that confused me. My generalized other and that of ITCO were in conflict. In my view, every opportunity for human interaction is an invitation towards insight and possible change. I believe that when we diminish our possibilities and repress our will by conforming we are devaluing ourselves. For ITCO's actors, my normative concepts of self-actualization were irrelevant. In ITCO, the individual and generalized other were not linked via 'mutual growth', 'dialogic creativity' or 'innovation'. In Mead's terms, 'neighborliness' is necessary if the self is to develop as a unified whole. But no such holism was on the agenda.

My intention was to shore up ITCO's lack of accountability and responsibility among its managers which had led to losses in projects and poor profitability. I thought that best practices could eventually lead ITCO to resolve its problems. The lack of follow-up by managers and the 'I don't care' attitude of the consultants shocked me. Such conflict indicates that the world of my 'self' collided with the generalized world of ITCO. Even though I intended to take on the attitude of the dominant other, doing so would have been an essential part of my survival; I was out of step. My social existence was precarious. Why was I kept on? Probably to sooth managerial guilt, 'See we are trying to address our problems' and for the status, 'We have an international consultant'. I was operating on the edge, expecting frustration and anger, but simultaneously knowing that the 'edge of chaos' is ripe with possibility.

I was not in command anymore. The actions and commitments of the ITCO managers were loose, and the risk of letting go was so high, my whole job was potentially at stake. I could no longer sufficiently impose control or authority on the conversations with others, so I stopped trying. Simply paying more attention to others seemed to generate a more open and transparent discussion, rather than just more recalcitrance. Paradoxically, the more I let go, the more 'attention' there seemed to be from others. Thinking about 'I', 'Me', and 'others', I was testing letting go and still being in control. The clients were happy with the 'attention', although it was not problem or solution directed. I was going with the flow, which they liked. Because I was focusing on relatedness and deep listening I was doing something very different from ITCO's daily culture. I had perhaps found a sort of compromise. I honored their values by focusing on the now and immediate feelings; but I was loyal to my values by concentrating on community, dialogue and belonging.

For ITCO's executives and its UAE owners their dreams were realized when they were making lots of money. They all owned, and still own, several real estate assets and luxury cars; they travel around the world to play their favorite sports, and no-one has to pay a single dollar from his own pocket. Most importantly, no-one went to jail. An observer would probably conclude that this is paradise. Any businessman strives to reach such a position. I could not have imagined that ITCO would end up in such a comfortable situation. In my case, I lost my consulting contract with ITCO. I was not paid for my last engagements and I am back in Canada with no permanent job. I have ambivalent feelings about their paradise. Have I lost the chance to make millions as well? I was content that ITCO post-2010 was making money again, while at the same time I hated the fact that the goals of my consulting interventions were not being met. I was content that none of ITCO's executives went to jail, but I hated the fact that I was the one who had lost the most. Mead's claim that self and identity emerge in public acts is confirmed.

But why and how did ITCO's actors manage to maintain such practices, attitudes and behavior? Bourdieu's concept of habitus comes in here. Looking back at the ethnographic data, what sort(s) of 'capital' did ITCO's managers and executives possess? Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a conceptual framework that helps us understand and analyze these. The habitus under hyper-capitalism or is it hyper-capitalism's habitus, reigns here. For Bourdieu (1990a), the habitus

is the durable, transposable, structured (and structuring) dispositions of individuals. The habitus is shaped by one's experiences and determines how we act in the world. Habitus thus informs our practices that guide us in managing change and uncertainty. While it is both historically and socially situated, habitus is second nature, but it is not fully deterministic. Habitus may also be novel, adapting to new forms and actions, and responding to changes in social relations.

A Sociology of Habitus

In ITCO, aspirations, aims, beliefs and motives for accumulating wealth and maximizing personal profit also reflected a desire to gain symbolic recognition. Within the social context, ITCO executives acted in pursuit of their specific goals. The managers and executives embodied a particular performativity, imbued with prestige and status. This embodiment illustrates how the processes of becoming are bound up with the socio-spatial context within which the lives are lived, and within which the social networks and relationships are constructed. I, therefore, approached the daily practices and values of ITCO's managers as social attractors.

Sociological approaches to hyper-capitalism tend to either consider a macro view dominated by structural effects or a micro view of identity change. The case of ITCO's hyper-capitalism compels us to move away from both of these approaches and to consider practices and the field(s) where the interactions occur. Here actors behave according to their context, particularizing meanings; social structure depends on forms of capital which actors strive to implement.

In the description of ITCO, ITCO was described as a complex network of brand representations. ITCO was the sole licensee of Erikson, Lenovo, etc.; and a major representative of Oracle, SAP, etc. Thus for hardware and software implementation, ITCO existed thanks to the Euro-American or Asian firms that it represented. Representation was highly political; it was the fruit of one's relationships and depended upon support in the ruling circles of the UAE. ITCO represented very desirable brands or products; and it sub-contracted projects and work to other firms in IT projects. In such a project-based industry, firms organize their structures, strategies and capabilities around the needs of projects,

which often extend across conventional firm boundaries. The contexts of projects and organizations can be very diverse, ranging from organizational units to organizational fields. Some writers have highlighted the extent to which projects are embedded in the wider society (Ekstedt & Wirdenius, 1999). Most organizational literature also tends to approach the theme of embeddedness, seeing it as networks of formal and informal relations. It does, however, remain unclear how the wider context, in particular hyper-capitalism, has implications for organization.

Granovetter (1985) points to the 'social embeddedness' of any economic activity in interpersonal networks. A more general view of social embeddedness highlights the dependency of individual and collective action on the structures of social systems. Social systems exist in time and space, displaying differing degrees of institutionalization. They exhibit structural properties to which agents refer, in their organizing practices. While structural theories (Giddens, 1979) provide traditional contextual views, and tend to emphasize the impact of these structures on social interaction, the role of agency in giving life to structures and contexts is often ignored.

In ITCO, the operation of the organization took place in social and political fields where the practices of hyper-capitalism correspond to the dispositions of the executives and the ruling economic and political order. Actors in ITCO inhabit a hyper-capitalist field of production and seek to seize the economic, social and cultural resources afforded by that field. ITCO managers acquired a hyper-capitalist mentality, conveyed by the practices belonging to the hyper-capitalist field. These practices included notions of growth strategies through sales and expansion, maintaining a successful image at any cost, giving gifts and building necessary social relationships.

The struggles and tensions that accompany hyper-capitalism were crucial to ITCO's development. To examine hyper-capitalism I turn to Bourdieu's (1984; 1988b; 1990a; 1993; 1998; 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) theories of social action and social fields. Bourdieu's theory is frequently referred to in hyper-capitalism studies (Graham, 2005; Ho, 2009). In the past few years, there has been a revitalization of social structural approaches to the theoretical analysis of organizational practice. In particular, Bourdieu's conceptions of field, practices, habitus and forms of capital, have been used by scholars to make such

analyses (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Lounsbury, 2008; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2003).

Applying Bourdieu's concepts in studying a private company illustrates that 'economic capital' does not always constitute the only determining factor, even in the private sector and even in a company heavily influenced by a performance discourse. By focusing on an organization rather than a field, we choose a level of analysis particularly close to individual interpretation and action, in order to understand how criteria for distinction emerge from individual practices (Bourdieu, 1984).

I did not begin to focus on Bourdieu until I began analyzing my data. My observations and interviews were not skewed by a Bourdieu mindset. By allowing the data to speak for itself, I was presented with an opportunity to use the concepts of 'field', 'habitus' and 'capital' in a management context. I did not postulate a priori which field was to be taken into account; I had to determine empirically the multiplicity of fields relevant to understanding the practices of the different social actors.

Bourdieu (1977) created a relational theory focused on the dialectic character of the relationship between agency and structure. He argued that the social world and the subjects within it are co-constituted through dialectical relations between objective structures and the structured dispositions that agents hold, which in turn actualize, reproduce and transform those very structures. Bourdieu's analytical framework exposes a circular relationship between different layers of social reality, in which the notions of field, capital and habitus are interlinked. The relevance of his relational theory to organizational studies has been identified as Everett (2002) asserts, "certain concepts associated with [Bourdieu's] thought, such as field and capital, are already widely known in the organizational literature." Everett has suggested that it is possible to see the organization as a field "in which a game takes place" or "as a field of relations between individuals who are competing for personal advantage" (Everett, 2002, p. 60). Similarly, Lounsbury and Ventresca (2003), explore the re-emergence of a new structuralism in organizational theory, and argue that Bourdieu's notion of field provides a systematic approach for organizational researchers to explore structure and agency in a single framework.

Bourdieu's relational approach accords primacy to individual and group relations within the social space of various fields. In ITCO's socio-political-economic ensemble of hyper-capitalism, the actors believed in maximizing their capital accumulation for influence and rewards. Likewise they shared a set of values, logics and discourses, and worked within similar socio-economic structures. This commitment to logic and values corresponds to what Bourdieu calls 'illusio', which is "the fact of being caught up in and by the game of believing the game is 'worth the effort'" (Bourdieu, 1988a, p. 77). Any member of a field is subject to 'illusio'. Actors in their everyday lives invest a great deal of time, energy, expertise and their very identity, in participating in their field.

Fields are not fixed. They are conceptual spaces that are realized by actors and organizations, who are sharing specific interests and goals. According to Bourdieu, each individual brings with them their histories, tastes and dispositions, and how they operate within a field will have an effect on how the field itself is formed (Bourdieu, 1998). Actors in ITCO's field will generally be disposed by the working of their habitus, to strive for recognition, fast accumulation of capital, and will be looking for better positions. This organizational field values commitments to maximize revenues, branding, acceptance of the rules, impassivity, and an acceptance of common-sense rather than the constant testing of knowledge claims or pursuit of transparency of findings.

I stretch, here, the concept of field across the social space of the UAE, taking us beyond my empirical investigation of ITCO. Utilizing Bourdieu's concept of field to discuss the impact of hyper-capitalism, leads to acknowledging that social meaning lies not so much in the products of hyper-capitalism as in the practices that routinize their production. It is through such practices that the symbolic and social orders are connected. In the example of ITCO, 'the global' is played out as a cultural strategy by actors endowed with a form of habitus that remains to be specified. A habitus is usually formed through negotiated action in which actors are identified with their local resources and discourses. In ITCO's hyper-capitalism habitus the actors developed an ethos and set of experiences that frame and empower them to seek revenue growth and wealth accumulation that led to insolvency. But the actors had a 'practical sense' understanding of the righteousness of their actions.

The forms of interaction and practices of ITCO's managers and executives were repeated each day. The range of individual behaviors stretched from those seeking to increase their wealth, to the closing of bids and deals, to arguing about projects and criticizing one other, to looking for jobs, and finally to lavishly entertaining themselves at the end of day. In Chapter Two I have indicated the internal logic of the managers' field(s) and the dynamic interactions of the actors and their external environment; their viewpoints, the interpretations attached to their experiences, the ways in which the individuals and groups interacted, the power inherent in particular contexts, the relationships and interrelationships that existed intra- and extra-organizationally, and how the process of practice did not change over time. Bourdieu's position explains the relative durability of differing forms of hyper-capitalist behavior or practices, addressing both structure and agency in the process. This, in turn, brings to light the manner in which the very pursuit of wealth and the cultivation of lifestyles are themselves caught up in various struggles for social recognition or 'distinction'.

At first glance, Bourdieu's theory seems entirely unsuitable to the UAE. His concepts were meant to address events and the sociology of France in the late twentieth century. In contrast to France, the study of ITCO portrays a heterogeneous society; the UAE is a young nation, oil and expatriates are the main contributors to the economy, and various local traditions and a colonial heritage intermingle with globalization and transnational cultures. The model of society that Bourdieu develops in his studies views society in terms of a nation state containing a homogeneous population with a class structure. But in my view, contemporary UAE is not an incoherent case to be dismissed as an exception. And, despite remaining within a Eurocentric framework, Bourdieu himself started his career as a sociologist and anthropologist in Algeria at the end of the colonial period in the 1950s where he developed most of his concepts.

Social reality, according to Bourdieu, exists in relational realms that include schemes of perception, thoughts, actions, and social structures. Hence, in the sociological analyses, the individual and society should be constructed as two dimensions of the same social reality (Swartz, 1993). Bourdieu constructs this connection between the socialized body and the structural logics of the social space, through a set of conceptual devices: the habitus, being more related to the

socialized body, while other concepts are more focused on the structural logic of the 'field'.

I want to analyze both executives and managers' roles in the shaping of ITCO pointing to how the UAE's hyper-capitalism helped to instantiate their attitudes and practices. I examine the values and practices of ITCO's stakeholders that led to the financial booms and busts. I seek to demonstrate and explain the experiences of the executives, managers and shareholders, as shaped by the hyper-capitalist context that empowered them.

Accessing the values and practices of executives, managers and shareholders, allows us to unpack the organizing of hyper-capitalism. Actors in hyper-capitalism create practices demanding forms of 'skills' and 'strategies' necessary to enter the field. Through an analysis of Bourdieu's key concepts—habitus, capital and field—I explore how organizations such as ITCO may be investigated not only through its processes, structure and interactions, but also through (so-called) objective relations that exist beyond these processes and networks. Pierre Bourdieu, in *The Logic of Practice* (1990a), suggested investigating practices not by looking at how people consciously rationalize their actions, but by constructing the object of study in terms of how a specific field (context) and a specific habitus reciprocally construct each other. This allows the sociologist to build an understanding of a world in which individuals rationalize their actions. A central argument in Bourdieu's *Logic of Practice* is that we can never know things in themselves; there are no universal truths because every idea is filtered and expressed through discourse, language and other symbolic forms (Bourdieu, 1990b). Beliefs, thoughts, values and judgments are implicitly and explicitly interrelated and shaped in the field(s) of play. But this does not undermine network analysis; indeed, as Bourdieu himself explains, a study of organizations must necessarily entail an analysis of networks, leading analysts "to construct the network of the objective relations among establishments that, like heavenly bodies belonging to the same gravitational field, produce effects upon one another from afar." (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1998, p. 132)

Before considering how ITCO can be analyzed through Bourdieu's ideas, it is necessary to define his key concepts and to outline the core of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990a) present a general theory and methodology for the study of

dialectic agency and of structures that are embedded in society. Bourdieu's concept of habitus and its relationship to the concepts of field and capital form a theoretical framework and the basis of a methodology that are supposed to enable the rigorous investigation of human actions and interactions.

My conceptualization of Bourdieu's concepts:

My primary engagement with Bourdieu's work is in relation to his notion of social field, which he defines in the following way:

A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1998, pp. 40-41).

The field captures the socially constructed and negotiated positions of actors and organizations between which strategic action takes place. Although fields are constructed through discourses and practices, it is the individual agents who enact these discourses and practices. According to Bourdieu, a field is occupied by agents who implicitly acknowledge the rules of the field through the very act of 'playing the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As such, a circular relationship exists between the micro and macro levels of social reality, that is, between agents and structures. Thus, understanding a field requires investigation of the structures of the field, forms of legitimate capital, and of the individual agents who enact, reproduce, and subscribe to the structures. In Bourdieu's terms, "the field of play is a field of objective relations between individuals and institutions that are competing for the same stake." Maintaining one's position requires gaining capital in all its forms, which leads to the reproduction of the field. Bourdieu sees every actor interacting with a conglomeration of fields, including organizations, family and others.

The relations in each field create dominant classes in each, but the process of struggle for capital is comparable in each and capital can be exchanged from one field to the other. A field offers resources, values, and relations that the actors use when they establish their internal perception of self and when they negotiate and transform the underlying dispositions that create meaning and practice (in

the habitus). A field also provokes expectations about behavior, both in the present and in the future (Bourdieu, 1977). The earlier an individual enters a field, the less she or he will be aware of the associated learning of the 'rules of the game' and the greater is her or his "ignorance of all that is tacitly granted through his or her investment in the field" (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 67). The dynamic principles of a field, Bourdieu (in Wacquant, 1989, p. 30), "lie in the form of its structures and, in particular, in the distance, the gaps, between the various specific forces that confront one another." These forces are what define the specific capital of a field. A field is meant to encompass a structural logic according to which specific types of capital compete against each other for a stake in the game; every field has its own self-defining stakes and interests, which are irreducible in relation to the stakes and interests specific to other fields (Bourdieu, 1993). The structural logic that a field imposes on actors specifies the forms of struggle, which are internalized through forms of embodiment; the actors mobilize their embodied or objectified properties as forms of capital to pursue their specific interests.

Bourdieu sees any social formation as consisting of a hierarchy of multiple, relatively autonomous fields, with their own logics of practice, hierarchies, and power relations among the agents and their positions within the field, with the sum of the parts being greater than the whole. The extent of field autonomy is reflected in the strength of its capacity to refract interference from other fields. Collectively all fields are overlaid by a field of power. Agents within each field compete for control of the interests specific to that field, and utilize their capital (**economic, cultural, and social**) in this competition. The habitus of actors affects the extent of their 'feel for the game'.

Bourdieu's ideas have been applied in the broader context of a 'field' such as universities or media (Ladwig, 1994). But business organizations often straddle different social fields, opening questions about hierarchy. How do the logics of practice within a field connect with those in other fields? How do social fields affect other social fields? Ladwig has suggested that contemporary organizations exist as fields with multiple levels, one of which has a global character (Ladwig, 1994). Under conditions of globalization, the autonomy of organizational fields is reduced. This is in line with Bourdieu's last writings. In his political essays, *Firing Back* (Bourdieu, 2003) and in *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu, 1999), he critically documented the negative effects across many differing fields of the

political field of the neo-liberal global economy. Drawing on Bourdieu (2003), the amount of ‘local capital’ possessed by a given organization within different fields is a determining factor in the degree of autonomy it can muster. Rawolle (2005) suggests that looking at practices, which are embedded in multiple fields, and their habitus, allows for a methodological resolution accounting for in multiple fields (see Figure 10).

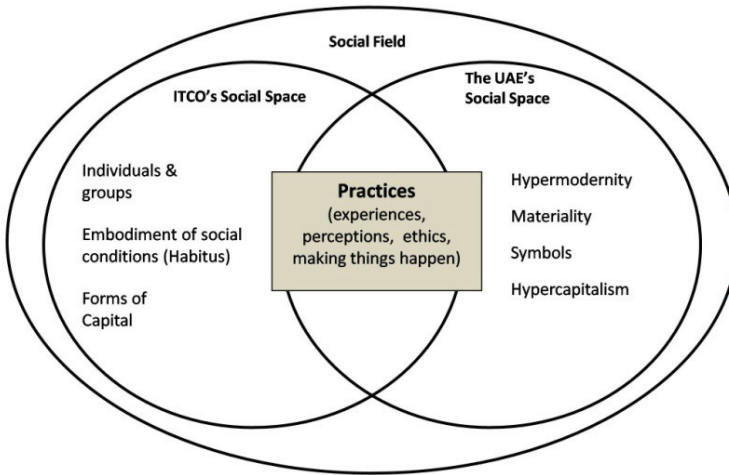


Figure 10. Re-conceptualizing Bourdieu’s concepts in multiple fields.

For Bourdieu, practical activities provide social meaning to actors, such as gift exchange, farming activities, sales activities, or common rituals. Through the use of practices, individuals and groups make meaning of the world and individuals are able to shape and construct the world around them. To be a part of particular practices, individuals need to have a ‘feel for the game’, indicating an understanding of the rules, strategies and tactics in the field involved (Bourdieu, 1998). Actors in organizations interact in multiple fields and their practical activities call into action strategies for the accumulation of capital in those fields of play.

The concept of field(s) insists on the necessity to think relationally. The notion of field draws on and explores changing relations among the elements within any particular field and its relations with other fields. The positions of actors within a field are never determined a priori and for all time, but change and shift depending on the distribution and kinds of capital. Further, the relationship among different fields and within them are mediated through the specific

particularities of their present and histories. The possibility for collective strategic action occurs when two or more groups engage in joint strategic action.

Individuals embody the structural logic of the field through their habitus and doxa¹⁴. These are the modes of reproducing the objective social structures within the cognitive schemata of the individuals. Individual actions are not purely mechanical responses to external structures, but instead symbolic interests and the habitus shape them: “the social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). Persons accumulate capital and in their individual histories they build a habitus as their particular frame of reference.

Habitus is constructed via the historical trajectory people go through. Once acquired, habitus generates actions, assigns meanings to actions and settings. Habitus provides a focus for analyzing the experience of social agents and the objective structures underpinning experience (Bourdieu, 1988a). The formula is: (Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice. Habitus is visible as it comes into contact with field. During change, a new place in the field is occupied. Habitus is exposed through attempts to understand the informal, unspoken rules of the new environment. Habitus underpins practices guiding the individual in managing change and uncertainty. While it is both historically and socially situated, habitus can be novel, adapting to new forms and actions, and responding to changes in social relations. For Bourdieu, the habitus is the durable, transposable, structured (and structuring) dispositions of individuals (Bourdieu, 1990a). “The field, as a structured space, tends to structure the habitus, while the habitus, tends to structure the perception of the field” (Bourdieu, 1988a, p. 784). Not only beliefs and values affect change, but the field where action takes place is equally important. Habitus as a construct cannot be measured directly. Bourdieu (1977) indicates that habitus is revealed through a person’s perceptions, aspirations, and actions. The habitus that fits the

¹⁴ By doxa, Bourdieu means that which is unmentioned, unquestioned, and tacit: the natural and social world appears as self-evident characterized by a harmony between the objective structures and the 'subjective', internal structures of the habitus where the social world is perceived as natural, taken-for-granted and tacit (Bourdieu, 1990a).

organizational field can be defined as the habitus that enables owners, executives and managers to translate capital into actions relevant for their interests.

The habitus drives thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions. The habitus: “embodies history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history –it is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product ... [it entails dispositions of] spontaneity without consciousness or will” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 56). These dispositions do not depend solely on the individual but are at work within the individual. This is how structure takes on life. A person cannot contain a habitus because a habitus must be social, it must be created and recreated, produced and reproduced through interaction and social practices.

Individuals from a particular socio-economic group will usually have many aspects of habitus in common. A person’s dispositions will include beliefs about their chances of success in any given endeavor. Bourdieu postulates that one’s aspirations and subsequent actions are adjusted to the perceived probability of success. He refers to this as the ‘causality of the probable’. Dominant relations in society are often reproduced via the habitus. Frequently social and cultural relations are not reflected upon, they are just ‘lived’ (Creswell, 2003). Global and macro social structures and the structural arrangements and distribution of capital constitute experiences, which inform the habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Class, privilege and bias are embodied social capital and are part of the habitus. This embodiment is inherently bound to the context within which people’s lives are lived. Bourdieu emphasizes that agents are only partially knowledgeable; they are also influenced by subconscious and embodied motivations. Therefore, it is not necessary for individuals to be consciously aware of the value of their social relationships for these networks to count as capital. For Bourdieu, capital exchanges may be subconscious and governed by dispositions and choices that defy rational reflection. Socially and culturally constituted ways of perceiving, evaluating, and behaving, are often unquestioned and taken for granted. Such things may not be necessarily recorded formally but they are embodied in actors as the way in which things are done and are for them part of the natural order (Bourdieu, 1977).

Mainstream economic thought treats capital as a sort of ‘thing’ made up of plant and equipment, natural resources, and money. For Marx, capital is a ‘social relation of production belonging to a definite historical formation of society,

which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character' (Marx, 1996, p. 1). Bourdieu also emphasizes the need to avoid a 'substantialist reading' of the term 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu distinguished three fundamental forms of capital. First, there is the classic notion of Economic Capital defined in terms of the command over economic resources and possession of financial assets. Second, there is Social Capital that consists of relationships and the networks of influence, and the support people can tap into by virtue of their social position. It can be also defined as membership in formal and informal groups that gives privileged access to different types of resources. Third, Cultural Capital refers to explicit and implicit, formal and informal, cultural competences. These include the skills, attitudes, and knowledge parents teach their children, making the educational system a comfortable and familiar place in which they can easily succeed. Cultural capital appears in an 'embodied' state (personal character, life-style, ways of thinking, aesthetic taste, manners), an 'institutionalized' state (formal educational qualifications, competences confirmed by credentials), and an 'objectified' state (objects of cultural value, mainly works of art).

Bourdieu also describes a fourth type of capital: Symbolic Capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Symbolic capital entails the perception, understanding and recognition of the value attributed to any of the other forms of capital (social, cultural and economic). Symbolic capital is embodied in prestige, reputation and personal authority. Bourdieu (1977) has suggested that social and cultural capital can be converted into symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is made up of combinations of the other forms of capital and is fundamental to their use, in that it facilitates the conversion of social or cultural capital to economic capital. Symbolic capital resides in individuals; however, the production of symbolic capital is a socially constructed process, through which other forms of capital become accepted, socially recognized, and considered valuable.

Recognition of symbolic capital requires shared understanding and meaning by other actors of what constitutes value, and therefore what is considered legitimate, valid and useful. Symbolic capital refers to the ways in which the one person, group, organization is valued by others. Bourdieu (1988a) used the example of honor in Mediterranean societies as a typical form of symbolic capital. Honor only has currency through the representation that others have of

it and to the extent that there are shared beliefs about what is honorable or dishonorable.

Not all versions of capital are equally valuable and each field is characterized by a specific combination of capital(s). By defining one form of capital as belonging to a field, or as the most valued type of capital there, one group can dominate and enforce its own resources as crucial. The resources that constitute social capital are thus related to the field within which they are accumulated. Individuals use their capital to gain access to a higher position in the field of play. The rules of conversion from one capital to another differ in each field, and these rules can also be considered a constitutive element of the field. By definition, the dominating type of capital, or the most valued and desirable type will possess the highest value within that field in relation to other types of capital.

The potential of a group within an organization to acquire social capital may be greater than others. For example, those managers or executives closer to UAE nationals gain access to officials of value in closing sales. In addition, those at the executive level, who control the interactions with suppliers and banks, hold greater social capital than others do. Increasing sales, adding new customers, contracting for new products and maximizing revenue are socially and symbolically powerful. The process of recognition of both social and symbolic capital reflects the economic system's assumptions about usefulness. Such social capital is legitimate and leads to symbolic capital only as far as the networks involved are recognized within the organizational field(s). Thus, the context in which social actions take place has to be legitimized by the dominant capital. Interpretation must take the nature of the dominant form of capital into account. If social capital is the dominant, then organizational action must be understood in terms of characteristics related to social capital. Some of these characteristics, in the case of ITCO, could be the network of relationships with UAE nationals, suppliers, clients, and financial institutions. This dependence on social capital could be the key dimension of interpretation for observer and social actor alike.

Agents are positioned relative to other agents in a field according to the overall volume of capital in their possession and the composition of that capital. Economic capital can be converted into other forms of capital, just as social

capital can be converted into economic capital, but at different exchange rates. Economic capital is more liquid and more easily transferable from one actor to another. Economic capital can be passed from generation to generation, reproducing class legitimacy and domination over time (Bourdieu, 1988b). Social capital can be crucial, for example to gain promotion, between actors in an organizational field. For instance, an actor who has a limited network of relationships might find his opportunities to advance much less than those of another actor who has gained access to powerful internal and/or external officials.

As an actor's portfolio of capitals changes, his/her position in the field alters. But no social actor can act in only one single field. In fact, possession of capital makes us actors where ever that type of capital is in play. For example, by acquiring even a small amount of social capital in the UAE, one becomes an actor in the complex social networks of Abu Dhabi. By acquiring residency, one automatically obtains the right to work and becomes an actor in the fields of the labor market. It is assumed that the goal of every individual is to maximize profit (or, additional capital) from her/his capital exchanges (Bourdieu, 1991). As the social capital is exchanged, agents gain status, changing their relations and behavior to others. At the same time, the fields adjust to the new conditions of individuals. The capital gained shifts (the fields of) one's habitus.

In the UAE, economic capital (land, buildings, cars, bank accounts) and social capital (recognition and prestige) were crucial. Cultural capital – quality education, artistic sensitivity, possession of beautiful things – did not count for much. Abu Dhabi is fundamentally a *nouveau riche* society. Social capital, or acceptance by the local elite, was crucial. Through one's social capital one could gain wealth. According to Bourdieu, there is no area of human life, where one cannot find self-interested calculation, as well as kindness or altruism. Every field of human endeavor is defined by a set of competitive strategies and a field's practical logic. In Bourdieu's study of the Kabyle society, gift giving was a part of these strategies. Gifts were part of the game in the field of play, creating obligations, confirming relationships, and strengthening alliances. By way of gift giving symbolic capital is accumulated and advantage is gained over the other. This is how everyone else will perceive the actions and this will be their real meaning. To explain this practice in any other way is to resort to 'subjectivism' and to try to explain it only from a person's perspective. Gift giving is a form of

relatedness, best understood in terms of the creation, exchange and embedding of relationships and in UAE it is a crucial form of relationship creation.

In ITCO the owner has unmatched economic and symbolic capital. He is a senior government official with a broad range of connections and entrusted by the ruling family with administrative transactions and decisions. These relationships and connections influence ITCO's possibilities and identity. The top expat managers who have contact with the owner are in a privileged position. Others without those contacts are clearly in inferior and weaker positions. ITCO's president and the vice president of finance, with well-established connections to the owner, have built on their social capital to gain relationships to other government officials, suppliers, and the banks. On the other hand, sales and project managers have networks of connections gained through their daily work. These can lead to all sorts of tips, gifts and job offers. The expats want to accumulate wealth. They are less out to save money than to enlarge their field of play both in the UAE and in their country of origin. The most successful have possessions back home – houses, cars, bank accounts; that guarantee their future status. An Egyptian project manager said:

"I studied very hard to earn my degree. I always wanted to stay in Egypt and be around my family. But the opportunities were dismal. The fact that I live here in the UAE have not let me forget my country at any minute. I work to save money to go back and enjoy the money I earned. I have many fellow countryman and friends in the UAE so I do not feel really outside my country. I am proud of my profession and this is more important to me than anything else."

Cultural capital (a university degree) did not get him wanted he wanted in economic capital, so he became an expat. His social capital amongst his fellow countrymen in the UAE seems to have been satisfactory, but he still wants to transfer his economic capital back to Egypt, because he misses the cultural capital of living in the country of his family.

Ahmed, a sales manager:

"My motives have included building wealth, sales success, and recognition, and any company that would provide these would always become my target. I originally chose ITCO from many potential offers because of multiple factors, including the products and solutions, the salary and prestige of working in the

largest IT company, and ITCO's good reputation. But after some years, my main motive became wealth and career growth opportunities. Moving to a multinational could be a better option in the future."

Ahmed portrays himself in terms of his employer's capital. He wants to work for the company with the strongest economic, social, and cultural capital. Supposedly the employer's resulting symbolic capital will rub off on him somehow.

Applying the conceptualization of Bourdieu's *Theory of Practice* enables us to identify the social fields ITCO inhabits and the social habitus of its hyper-capitalism. ITCO is characterized by the reproduced social practices and relations common in it. I propose to proceed in three steps. The first is to identify the field(s) of actions. The second consists in accounting for the positions occupied by actors and organizations competing for what is at stake in the field(s) (e.g., recouping wealth and recognition). How do the actors compete in the acquisition of social capital to generate wealth and recognition? Third, the habitus of the agents must be analyzed to identify the different dispositions they have acquired and the kinds of capital they have accumulated. In this case, we need to identify the actors' hyper-capitalist habitus as it is played out in the economic and social fields.

Central in Bourdieu's logic of practice is that we never know things in themselves; every idea is filtered and expressed through discourse, language, and other symbolic forms (Bourdieu, 1990b). Beliefs, thoughts, values and judgments are implicitly and explicitly interrelated and shaped in the field(s) of play. We can try to know the deep social structures that can be theoretically investigated. The researcher has: "to uncover the most profoundly buried structures ... as well as the mechanisms which tend to ensure their reproduction or their transformation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.7). But Bourdieu claims that such structures exist in: the 'objectivity of the first order', that is as constituted by the distribution of capital, or the appropriation of surplus value. Further, they also exist in the 'objectivity of the second order', constituted by systems of categorization or the mental and bodily schemata of habitus, which function as symbolic templates for the practical activities of social actors (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.7).

Although each social field has its own structure of social positions and principles of functioning, there is a strong tendency towards homology. Hierarchical positions of power and advantage are replicated from one field to another, as one would expect given the transferability of capital across fields. Though there may be barriers to entry, fields are not solid but permeable. The most distinctive feature of the UAE field is that economics and politics are virtually indistinguishable. Both share the same dominant discourse—that of building and developing an ultra modern nation. The economic and political power is one, centered in the rulers. They make politically motivated appointments to business positions and funnel massive funds into various industries and projects. The economic field is subordinated to the political one. This is supported culturally, by widespread conspicuous consumption, fostered by an image or simulacra that UAE nationals want to portray to the world. The distinctions are supported by the abundance of wealth from oil revenues.

Companies like ITCO, for the first two or three decades of UAE's independence, could not raise private capital. Not until 2003, did a public stock exchange become active. But the state retains the ultimate power to supply funds and control the direction of the stock exchange, since most of the companies traded are state owned. Thus, by controlling private capital, the state reduced the 'free market economy' to simulacra. The political field maintains tight rules and control, not allowing the economic field much autonomy. The rulers have created a semi-autonomous economic field by creating so-called independent companies that are state controlled and managed by executives who only act on directions from the rulers. The rulers decided in the last decade to open up the economy up to foreign companies and they started to massively invest in real estate and projects. They encouraged the influx of funds by foreign capital asset companies and banks, opening new lines of credit to the local banks.

ITCO has been driven by the demand for new technologies in the UAE. The speed and intensity of local and global flows was enormous during the boom years. Consumption of both material and immaterial goods was accompanied by urgency, intensity, and a drive for the fast accumulation of wealth. Individuals pursued their self-interest with no checks and balances. In ITCO, the logic of sales and revenue growth dominated; to be an effective participant in the field it was essential to conform to its logic. Focusing on promotions, higher salaries,

prestige, and recognition was required. While investing in one's country of origin and looking for higher rates of returns was sanctioned.

ITCO's servicing and implementing of projects, required large lines of credit in order to support the accounts receivable of the company. Once completed, customers were expected to pay their receivables on time. ITCO was 'leveraged'. ITCO managed to show growth in sales revenue and assets. Banks were eager to extend lines of credit, earning hand over foot via their high interest rates. While projects were ITCO's main end-product, their financials were largely ignored. The processes of selling solutions, implementing projects, and financial reporting, were completely independent. 'Leveraging' allowed ITCO's actors to maximize sales revenues. ITCO's structure was built around the vice president of services, who was in charge of the delivery of projects– and the vice president of sales – who was responsible for relations with suppliers and vendors. As revenues grew in three digit figures, year after year, ITCO's executives and managers associated the maximizing of revenues with success. The hyper-capitalist context supported rapid expansion and easy access to credit. The habitus generated the business practices, practices that were evaluated, and practices that, in turn, were used to evaluate the social world, thus reproducing it. The habitus was primarily economic and social. Hyper-capitalism is a habitus that takes getting used to. The actor has to be sufficiently proficient to embody its assumptions in practice and to have “a sense of playing the game which is at once active and non-discursive” (Calhoun, 1993, p. 74).

Bourdieu did not spell out uses of habitus as a research method. As Reay (2004, p. 432) observes, habitus “is probably Bourdieu's most contested concept.” Everyday experiences are crucial. Ways actors embody structure, or what Bourdieu calls structure-structuring, are part of habitus. Habitus embodies structural limits for action and habitus generates aspirations, perceptions and practices. Dispositions then reflect the social context in which they are acquired. Habitus refers to the way of being in the world; our predisposed ways of thinking, acting, and moving in. It encompasses posture, outlook and tastes. Informing both the smallest and largest of actions (Sweetman, 2003). Acquired dispositions enable actors to function smoothly within a structure of relations, leading to the process of social reproduction that in turn leads to practices that reinforce the dispositions. The term 'disposition' is key for Bourdieu, as it suggests structure and propensity – or the predefined and voluntary.

Habitus is a relational concept. The formulation: (Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice, stresses the context or field(s). The hyper-capitalism habitus contains a set of dispositions leading to its actual practices. These practices indicate a subjective gestalt and action potentials that are inscribed in forms of capital. ITCO's managers and executives almost all came from a low- to lower middle-class background and their families are far from being wealthy. They became managers by meeting sales targets or through playing their cultural and/or social, rather than economic, capital. Coming from poorer Arab countries compared to the UAE, the executives and managers were born with low economic, social, and cultural capital. In their countries of origin, ethnic and cultural hierarchies are important for one's status and social position. The mechanism of social stratification is such that one's social capital determines one's access to jobs, relationships, and economic resources. These executives and managers tried to attend the best schools and universities in their country of origin, to gain better positions later. In most of their countries, leading universities like the American University of Beirut or Cairo are affiliated with US based universities; the education is based largely on a capitalist perspective. These universities try to reproduce American social and cultural values.

ITCO's managers and executives believe that the present wealth from oil revenues will not last forever. The UAE rulers have invested billions of dollars to convert their country from being a pure oil exporter to becoming a tourist destination. Statistics show that oil reserves in the UAE could last for another ninety years.¹⁵ The fear of the 'end of oil' is an important element in the predominant dispositions, although it does not produce a more cautious kind of investor. To the contrary, it seems to produce a 'last waltz on the Titanic' spirit. What is possible right now may never be possible again.

The western educated UAE nationals have become the CEOs of newly established companies and have learned to use the capitalist's language and labels in dealing with others. But the political structure has not changed. The ruling families remain the decision makers on all matters. Their social capital has held its own, as they still maintain similar relationships with their allies and networks.

¹⁵The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), January, 2013((EIA), 2013).

ITCO's managers formed strong intra-organizational and societal networks. They often had stronger ties with their suppliers' salesmen and their colleagues in other organizations (even competitors) than within ITCO. Vendors and suppliers could maximize their revenues by establishing strong ties with ITCO's sales managers. The latter could concentrate on selling the suppliers' products rather than those of others. Throughout Abu Dhabi, managers 'chatted' about potential opportunities for better pay.

Economic capital could be measured in terms of property ownership; cultural capital by educational credentials; social capital by the network of relationships, and symbolic capital by how visible the other forms of capital are how easily they can be converted to one's advantage. For example, how easily can one's 'expert' status be converted to financial luxury, or how can one 'buy' a place within the elite?

Capital is always contingent on the playing field. Some forms of capital accrue more 'interest' than others. The value of any capital increases, or decreases, through its scarcity or abundance. In ITCO's field(s) of play, managers and consultants sought to accumulate capital, depending on their trajectory¹⁶, but mostly centering on economic capital, with social capital following suit. The habitus emphasized the benefits of hyper-capitalism. All expats were dependent on UAE nationals who make all the political decisions, from the approval and entry of expatriates to the legislative rules on who has the right to bid for projects in the lucrative oil sector. As expat, the best you could do was getting close to a UAE national, to share some of his social clout. Social networks were crucial to sales, though branding did have some pull.

In hyper-capitalism accumulated economic capital is transferred into cultural and social capital (e.g. providing a privileged position within the newly created market economy). During the boom, the UAE nationals who had money (economic capital) and possessed strong ties with the ruling families, increased their income by buying into the real estate market. Their strong social ties gave

¹⁶ Within a field, individuals occupy a specific position at any one point in time and also a trajectory of positions through time. The position of an individual is shaped by the network of relationships and capital. In this sense, the individual's biography, including both the objective resources he starts with and the uses he makes of them, describes a trajectory through the space of objective positions in the field, which itself may be developing and changing. This trajectory is produced partly by the way the individual plays the game, and by material factors (Bourdieu, 1993).

them access to market information on what was being planned whereby they could make informed decisions on where to invest. Once the 2008 crisis hit the UAE, many saw their fortunes tumble. But people close to the ruling family were protected from bankruptcy. The banks were told that they were not allowed to foreclose on them.

In UAE's hyper-capitalism, social capital was the dominant form of capital. You had to have strong relationships to succeed in the marketplace. When it came to giant IT projects, the principal market of ITCO, money did not really play a big role. The amounts of money involved were enormous and all players had that sort of money. If you didn't you just could not even entertain entering the field. ITCOs vice presidents and managers could only play as ITCO, as individuals they were nothing and they knew it. Even the president had very limited social capital. He was afraid in the crisis period (2009) that he would become the fall man; and might even go to prison. Because UAE has no bankruptcy laws, if ITCO went under someone would have to be legally charged. That could never be the owner and thus the president's fear. He could flee ITCO, treating it as a sinking ship, and run to Lebanon, but he felt obligated to do everything he could to save the firm. But, if it came down to criminal charges, he wondered whether he should stay and be convicted or flee. The owner's social capital saved the day. The banks were told from a high to back off whereby ITCO had the financial space and possibilities to save it.

ITCO's cultural capital has been reduced by hyper-capitalism. Back in 2004, ITCO was fairly unique, but over the years international IT consulting firms have entered the market. Better trained consultants have been brought in from Europe. ITCO never invested in training or keeping its consultants up-to-date. Their level of professional proficiency is not really very high. Professionals with better and higher university degrees and more sophisticated practice have entered the market. The old adage that no one was ever fired in Abu Dhabi for incompetence is no longer so certain. Quality of workmanship becomes more important the more open and competitive the field becomes.

While ITCO had the social capital needed to survive the economic crisis, it came out of the crisis reduced to less than 10% of what it once was. It lost a lot of symbolic capital as it was reputed as economically weak and no longer a

powerhouse in the IT market. ITCO's doxa of sales and more sales, supported by always growing revenues, could not weather the 2009 hyper-capitalist storm.

ITCO was during 2002-2008 a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992): not conscious of the water around it because it was perfectly at home in it. The managers coped effortlessly with their situation, having embodied a practical sense of working in the field of play. But 2009 introduced new elements and individuals found themselves in different 'water'. During the years 2009-2010, the field(s) surrounding ITCO jittered and new rules and conditions came into place. ITCO's internal discourse turned from success to survival. Many found themselves like fish out of water, struggling to survive.

During my February 2013 visit to the UAE, after an absence of almost three years, I met with ITCO's president and vice president of sales. ITCO had become a company of less than fifty employees with no salespeople. Bank negotiations had led the banks to drop more than half of ITCO's debt. The vice president of sales talked about the great potential in the market and his eagerness to acquire new brands. He was ever more optimistic of the future potential in the UAE. I listened to the discussions between the president and the vice president. The president was less enthusiastic in tone, but had just come back from a meeting with a senior UAE official for a US \$20 million project that he had discussed in the parking lot inside the official's car. The vice president kept defending his belief in another UAE boom and the need to be ready.

ITCO had lost much of its social capital. Economically, ITCO could not report profit for 2010. As a gravy train for expatriates; executives, managers, consultants and administrative staff, ITCO was deeply diminished. Power was still distributed exactly the same; the UAE national owners still had the power, knowing that banks and creditors could easily have sued, but that this was politically unacceptable. Some expats had earned well, but none of them had actually managed to escape their dependency positions.

Hyper-capitalism would roll on, with or without ITCO. The irony of ITCO's hyper-capitalism is that everything and nothing was economic. In hyper-capitalism there is unlimited money and economic activity or growth on an unheard of scale. Business is hyper-booming. But in Abu Dhabi business is consumed rather than produced. All the business activity was not producing new wealth; it was consuming oil dollars. Supposedly all the economic activity

would eventually produce new wealth. But there was no proof that it would ever get there. The managers and consultants at ITCO could act the way they did because money had no real value to the owners. The airport, or the police, or the army supposedly needed advanced IT systems because that was 'how it is supposed to be' according to the standards of Europe or America. The airport or airline did not have to make a profit; they had to be big, modern, impressive and 'successful.' The money came from oil, not from all the rest. The money was a precondition of hyper-capitalism and not a product of hyper-capitalism. ITCO and its clients (except for the oil industry) did not produce wealth, they consumed it.

When I tried to understand ITCO as any other capitalist company that had to make a profit, I was wrong. Abu Dhabi was capitalism turned on its head – companies had to seem to do things economic, but did not really have to do any such thing. There was no scarcity of economic capital, nor was there really competition for it. You might think that such hyper-capitalism would be liberating. The value of what the consultants produced was probably lower than their salaries. Labor was definitely not being exploited. But ITCO was never creative, remained socially fearful, and I saw it as culturally and humanly 'stuck.'

CHAPTER 4

Complexity of ITCO

The analysis in Chapter 3 is valid as a modernist description of ITCO. It examined the social construction of identity first on a more micro level or the level of self and relationships, and subsequently on the more societal, socio-economic and cultural level. These analyses produced systems' insights into ITCO, where ITCO appears unto itself somewhat stable. The economic crisis of 2008 eventually reached ITCO and forced change. But change, as far as it went, came from without and not from within. It seems that ITCO was internally fairly stable. Given that it never really made a profit and that most of its projects never really worked as they should have, this is a remarkable conclusion. ITCO was a story of 'sufficing'. It just kept getting by, even though it seemed as though it simply could not.

But the conclusion that forms of capital and how they relate to one another and to circumstance determines what we can see and know about ITCO is not very satisfying. Most notably, it destroys the relationship between scarcity and excess as a key factor. Scarcity and excess are reduced in Bourdieu to aspects of forms of capital. ITCO as a living phenomenon is reduced to epiphenomena of the play of the forms of capital. Bourdieu's habitus is singularly un-lived-in. I want to conclude with descriptors that bring me closer to ITCO and the people who 'lived there'. Chapter 3 is not wrong or false as such, but I feel I may have lost touch with experienced existence in its analysis. Thus, my challenge in Chapter 4 is to rediscover the dynamics of ITCO's hyper-real, hyper-capitalist existence.

To achieve this we must turn to the study of dynamics – of social occurrence as change, movement and motion. My theoretical baggage is social complexity theory. Complexity theory asserts that there are various types of attractors. An attractor works as a sort of metaphorical magnet on the persons, groups, organizations, etc. under observation. The actant is ‘attracted’ to certain goals or behaviors. The attraction can be direct and causal (‘a leads directly to b’), but it can also be circular (a chain, for instance of thesis-antithesis-synthesis always repeats itself), or polar (to and fro, repeated over and over), or unpredictable. The last option, the so-called ‘strange attractor’, provides for change, innovation and the new. It is the emergent attractor and *qua* social or historical transformation that is the most interesting. The concept of the strange attractor transcends modernism – it asserts that the new will happen and change will occur. Existence is not entirely analytically comprehensible. Society and history are not bound by Newtonian physics; the new, unknown and unique, will emerge. Change is real.

By applying the theory of attractors to my case study, it is clear that point or fixed attractors pertain to simple causality: stimulus/response, change determined by technology push, the effects of economic growth, etc. While the UAE’s economic boom formed a crucial contextual element in the ITCO case, attitudes and responses were not a simple effect of the economics of excess. Cyclical or periodical attractors produce repeating patterns. (Neo-)Marxists view capitalism as a repeating polar pattern of growth and bust, or bear and bull markets. UAE’s hyper-capitalism may have experienced a hiccup in 2008, but there was no crisis. ITCO underwent a mini-crisis but today still exists, although in a smaller form. But the attitudes and assumptions of the managers and consultants at ITCO – or those no longer at ITCO – have not changed or developed, as far as I have been able to ascertain (and I have tried to follow as many persons as possible). Thus if there is a pattern, I do not know what it is; I only see repetition without difference. Certainly there has not been any political shift of awareness in the (ex-)employees or managers. Life in hyper-capitalism has not been disrupted, nor have any of the players voiced any economic or political critique of the boom years. Before and after there was no political awareness or interest by anyone. The focus on the ‘fast-buck’, if anything, has intensified.

ITCO could be regarded as under the attractor of the deskilling of labor. The cycle supposedly runs from 'craftsman labor, to skilled industrial labor, to deskilled labor'. The theory, the basis of labor process theory, argues that advanced capitalism destroys skilled labor and professionalism as it 'industrializes' all production. Just as Henry Ford made skilled labor unnecessary to build automobiles, contemporary IT systems are making legal, medical, etc. skills redundant. Similarly, it could be argued, based on French social theory, that ITCO is an illustration of 'proletariatization'. Stiegler (2011) argues that knowledge is being usurped by management and put into IT technology. Management decides what happens, when and exactly what is produced. Workers lose all control of production and cease to have any input into what is produced. Skilled work is remade into unskilled work. Pride of workmanship is reduced to routine and deadening automatism. Stiegler asserts that this cycle is proletarianizing lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers and teachers. Employers and corporate interests control and manipulate, as they please, the work of the former professionals now re-baptized 'knowledge workers'. However, ITCO's professionals were not really professionals at all. They did not have the knowledge-base, pride of workmanship or self-awareness needed to be real professionals. They can be viewed as a new proletariat. But the idea that this is a socio-economic cycle that is repeating itself is problematic. The UAE did not experience the industrial revolution. Thus, there is definitely not a socio-economic pattern here repeating itself. Only if we look at ITCO as a European object of study can we make use of Stiegler's argument. And I, personally, do not want to proceed that way. Significantly, almost no one involved in the ITCO story was European. Maybe European patterns were repeating themselves, but it is apparent that none of the players actually experienced matters in that way.

There is the case of strange attractors. Strange attractors are creative. They attract events to the new, unexpected and creative. A problem that for instance Letiche and Lissack (2011) had in their social complexity analysis was that organizations did unexpected and new things. Organization was emergent. But ITCO was not very emergent. Despite change in its business environment, ITCO stayed *qua* its basic social rationality the same. Even now, after being scaled down and having lost its prominence, the consultants and managers that are still there, think, act and seem to understand themselves and others exactly as they

did a decade ago. Despite changes in the circumstances, the people and organization resist all change.

Social complexity theory has defined three different concepts of how to deal with complexity. Letiche and Lissack (2011) call for complex dialogue, Dekker (2011) calls for intensified diversity and Cilliers (2007) calls for an ethics of slowness. I submit that all three do not apply to this case study. Letiche and Lissack think that lived (versus ascribed) emergence destabilizes assumptions, vocabulary and awareness. History and circumstances constantly afford different possibilities and actions. The trick is to identify these, see them on time and make wise use of possibilities. That is difficult because the 'possible' is, by definition, not-yet-clear, indefinite and uncertain. Thus, social complexity is an epistemological problem. No-one can know what is changing ahead of time. Only that which remains unchanged is linearly known in advance. Organizations and societies, they assert, really change and they call that change 'emergence'. Their claim is that living with, and within, emergence is necessary for the potential of change to be made humanly understandable and to bend change as far as possible in the interest of human existence and society. But their focus on dialogical relationships in acknowledged situations of change has nothing to do with my case study. The key factor in my case study is no matter how much social or economic change there was in the environment, the people and organization denied its existence and they survived via this denial. Everyone is still there, they are all still focused on profiting from hyper-capitalism and no critical conversation has occurred or seems likely to occur. On their personal micro level the denial of change, circumstance and emergence seems sustainable and successful within the boundaries of their goals.

As for Dekker, he claims that change and emergence can best be met by encouraging diversity and making diversity into an activity. In the UAE there is certainly enough diversity and (*idem*) ditto in ITCO. But both exist by denying the diversity and refusing to acknowledge it.

Finally, Cilliers' ethics of slowness argues that in non-linear emergent realities, small individual actions or events can make a big difference. Not the logic of big numbers or the masses, but the logic of creativity, initiative-taking and creativity is crucial to emergence's effects. However, in ITCO there is no individual creativity, but instead collective focus on immediate wealth. Everyone, apart and

separate from the others, is doing the same thing. Thus, there is enormous conformity and individualism at the same time. Each person seems focused on his/her individual task and profit, and because they are all the same there is no source of creativity or change. There is only more and more of the same. What Letiche and Lissack, Dekker and Cilliers all agree on is the identification of complexity with time, history, flow and change. They assume a European concept of time, event and progress. Emergence is another word in their vocabulary for how society changes or develops through time. However, this perspective does not work in ITCO. The UAE is essentially without a history. There were nomads with no recorded history, and now there is hyper-capitalism. Examining life from the perspective of how one gets from here to there through time is not applicable in the UAE. If there is no European historical concept of time, social complexity theory as I have received it, does not work. Trying to understand ITCO via point, cyclical (or polar) or strange attractors just does not work. The case of ITCO is not a history of a point attractor. There was no one principle that explained ITCO. Social capital may have allowed it to survive, but why did the owner create companies that he, then, more or less neglected? That expat managers and consultants feel no commitment to the institutions of Abu Dhabi is logical enough. The Gulf States treat expats as expendable labor. They have no rights, are excluded from all decision-making and have no reason to consider themselves citizens. Their only social involvement is through shopping. They work and consume. Their only civil society is with other expats from the same country of origin. They live in a world with no direct civil society for them and their reaction to their condition is rather predictable. Thus, the expat managers and consultants can be seen as governed by the point attractor of economic dependence. But this is true of many knowledge workers including workers who are not expats. When work becomes all-consuming and other facets to life are repressed by it, the same dehumanization occurs as described here.

Work that used to be characterized by independent judgment, high levels of cognitive skills and exacting standards of craftsmanship is being reduced to check-lists, protocols and standardization. Evidence-based practice amounts to regulated routine and the professional loses her or his involvement, passion and interest. This used to be called 'alienation'. When this occurs, only consumption remains as an interest. Work is boring and undesirable, but necessary and sought after. Stiegler argues that 'desire' collapses in such a regime. There is no

opportunity to create, to achieve unicity or to be involved. Marketing can wet our appetites only for so long. The products have little intrinsic value. Thanks to planned obsolescence most products are shabby, temporary and fairly uninteresting. As desire crimps, human will diminishes. Work is routine. Life is just getting by. Indifference gains the upper hand. The point attractor gets weaker and weaker. Depression becomes the most common social sickness, with its companion, hyper-nervousness, prevailing amongst the lonely, neglected and isolated youth.

Stiegler's psycho-social description of contemporary society is, of course, rather bleak. However, it does match a hyper-capitalist society driven by a point attractor. Stiegler argues that a crucial failure of such a society is its inability to educate its youth. The young get parked in front of televisions and video games, and are robbed of an education. The older generation is incapable of truly caring about what happens to them. The historical role of the older generation as those who pass on skills, knowledge and awareness is abandoned. The social capital produced since the enlightenment is abandoned and left neglected. Hereby, the historical cycle of making, passing on and continuing invention dies. The cyclical attractor of modernism is abandoned.

When Hugo got the ITCO vice presidents and executives to talk, they chose to talk about the education of their children. They were concerned about what their children learned and would become. The intergenerational passing on of skills and awareness was at the heart of the issue. But it was each of them apart. They shared no common concern, plans or ideas. Interestingly they all talked, if they talked, about their children and their up-bringing; however, the discussion was entirely serial. At no point did they even think of sharing their concerns or of formulating any joint action. They existed as monads – perhaps as nuclear families of monads – yet still as monads. If there was a cyclical attractor here (a repeated flow of action from one generation to another, or from one group of people to others) it was not shared or collective. There was no 'we'. Hence, Stiegler maintains, the cycle will grind to a halt. Cyclical attractors have to maintain their movement or energy from person to person, generation to generation, situation to situation. If they run out of energy, they just stop. No-one at ITCO was actively passing anything on to anyone else. ITCO existed for its personnel as a means to an end. It was a way to gain money fast. No-one was interested in investing self, energy or idealism either in ITCO or in Abu Dhabi.

The human energy needed to launch and sustain a cyclical pattern of development and growth was lacking.

Thus, either ITCO had no attractor – which more or less means that it was in a state of entropy or approaching death – or it had a strange attractor. A strange attractor it will not be. ITCO was not out of control, quite the opposite, it was socially very structured. The same patterns repeated themselves over and over. The ‘guile’ with which consultants informed me that projects were proceeding excellently when they were a total mess, and the way in which I was led to think that risk analysis was being used when it had long landed in the waste-baskets, appalled me. I was angry. But the ‘guile’ was a fixed, stable and constantly repeated pattern. I saw the lack of change or any real business development as ‘stuckness’; nevertheless, ITCO ‘flourished’ for more than ten years by doing the same things over and over. Companies and organizations that probably had no real need for Oracle, Siebel or SAP got versions of these installed that only partially worked. But as soon as one project was ‘completed’ another would start. All this IT contracting was just as much prestige driven as based on any real necessities. Thus, the one more or less failed roll-out was followed upon by the next one. The IT companies, like ITCO, made their money as this process was repeated. In this manner, there was a cycle of half-baked IT installations, a process that repeated itself but went nowhere.

A strange attractor refers to a history that produces something new and unexpected; where new technologies or organizational forms are produced. At ITCO nothing inventive or creative ever occurred. Despite the challenge of hyper-capitalism – an economic boom such as the world has rarely witnessed – there was no creativity. All the expertise was bought in. The locals did not design anything, propose anything or make anything that was new or unique. Abu Dhabi bought stuff from America and Europe. Ultimately they even bought some quality architecture and museums, i.e. the Frank Gehry Guggenheim and Jean Nouvel Louvre but neither of these is, as yet, open. They appear to be pure prestige objects, with no links to the local community. In effect, they are fabulous collectors’ items for the ruling families.

So what sort of attractor, if any, fits ITCO? The problem with the ‘point’, ‘cyclical’, and ‘strange attractor’ is that they are all modernist constructs. Modernism understands existence in terms of time. From Kant to Hegel,

modernist thought is grounded in the discovery of how existence takes place in time. Time flows, happens, evolves and progresses. The attractors are, simply, different ways for time to occur. It can be thought of as having a telos, an end and a point through which it is directed. Or it can be thought of as a process or cycle that repeats itself: from birth to maturity to death, from scarcity to growth to wealth, from agriculture to industry to post-industrial society, etc. The 'strange attractor' asserts that time is not linear and that existence can create something new, previously un-thought of and fundamentally creative. In all these cases, the attractors typify passage through time.

But what happens if there is no time? ITCO and hyper-capitalism, I submit, are timeless constructs. This is why Bourdieu was so applicable. Bourdieu, despite his Marxist heritage, was fundamentally a modernist structuralist. Moreover his way of seeing ITCO would be as a structure, i.e. a system. Bourdieu believed that systems were driven by conflict and that exploitation and class struggle ultimately drove humanity from field to field. But in Chapter 3, I, as many other scholars have done before me, deliberately omitted this Marxist element and chose to solely undertake the structural analysis. But in ITCO the various social layers do not interact with one another. Each layer has its own position which cannot be fundamentally changed. A consultant can work his way up to vice president, but he/she stays an expat with no ability for independent action. He or she will earn a bit more; have a bit more economic-social status, but his/her fundamental social position will stay the same. There are minimal opportunities for social mobility in Abu Dhabi. The outward appearances of the city changed dramatically, but the human condition was fixed and inflexible. If you want to develop yourself as a person, if you want to be creative, if you want to have spiritual influence upon others, then UAE is the wrong place for you. There is symbolic stasis in Abu Dhabi.

ITCO is a world without history. That is why everyone thought that the economic crisis would pass it by. Things happened: ITCO grew, almost disappeared and now exists as a shadow of what it was. But there is no one trying to understand ITCO as history. History requires people who take time and change through time seriously. Events do not enter into history if there is no symbolic capital, i.e. if no one notices, writes-up, analyses, discusses and debates. In fact there are no 'events' if occurrence is not symbolized. An 'event' is a slice of time that is storied by someone with a beginning, middle and an end. If the

storying does not take place, an endless flow of occurrences result without any history.

There is almost no social science research about the UAE and its history. Things happen but they are not recorded, witnessed or attended to. ITCO is a neglected object. No-one finds it necessary to know about it, think about it, study it or understand it. ITCO is not in time; it is not part of a story that matters to anyone. No-one really cares about ITCO. It is an object of indifference. And the people in ITCO see it that way too; and they see themselves in ITCO, that way. ITCO is characterized by a 'dead attractor'. Complexity theory assumes activity, emergence and vitality. Complexity asserts that the second law of thermodynamics is for societies wrong. Social life is not subject to entropy but becomes more and more complex. There is evermore energy in society and not less. Globalization and post-industrial society complexify society. They are forms of added complexity, inter-relatedness and holist interaction. But ITCO wants none of this. It was local, narrowly materialist and rather lifeless.

Theoretically, the 'dead attractor' is an important discovery. Complexity theory may have been needlessly optimistic by only assuming (post-)modernist attractors wherein time lives, moves and has motility. ITCO was (and is) senseless. It wants nothing to do with 'sense-making'. It does not want to know it. ITCO, for its employees, is a wealth-producing machine. ITCO is an assemblage with no effects. Nothing that it did mattered significantly to anyone. There are no effects. The only person in this book who was angered, worried, passionate and wanted to do things was myself.¹⁷ Even Bruno just wanted to repeat his text and make as much money as he could by doing so. He refused to engage with what happened to him when interacting with the ITCO managers.

I entered ITCO as a management consultant, which means that I assumed I was there to change things. Obviously, after the fact, I conclude that my assumption was wrong. ITCO was locked into its 'changelessness' and wanted to stay that way. ITCO, in fact, grew and shrank, dominated the local IT market and fell into disrepute, and through all of this it actually did not change significantly. The assumptions, way of operating and behavior all remained more or less the same. My management training, including an elite Canadian MBA, all taught change.

¹⁷ Hugo may have been 'affected' just a bit by his experience; but it was one afternoon and he was just passing through.

It saw business as many change processes, to be influenced, controlled and/or determined by management. However, I was confronted by 'stuckness' or 'changelessness': things I was entirely unprepared for.

My fall-back critical position was social complexity theory. It did not assume managerial control or linear rationality. Complexity theory at least offered the possibility that ITCO could self-organize and that a business organization is not necessarily a product of managerial strategy and commands. But complexity theory is also a change theory. It was born from the dilemma of bifurcation. How can one explain that an organization stayed almost endlessly the same, and then suddenly shifted dramatically to a new state? Bifurcations were explained by seeing organizations as paradigms, i.e. as a stable model, form or gestalt that when it shifts, shifts to another paradigm or stage of phase change. Metaphorically: either it is water or ice. At a key point it shifts from one to the other. A very small temperature change can make all the difference while a very large temperature change can make no difference at all. An organization can be so thoroughly locked into a plateau in its fitness landscape that it does not change quickly. That is, ITCO can be so totally adapted to Abu Dhabi and what sort of business it affords that it will not change easily into anything else. But I was not prepared for such an overwhelmingly tight fit. After all, complexity theory is set up to explain change and not the lack of change. In both Letiche and Lissack (2011) and Goldstein (1994) the research describes and debates change.

To use complexity thinking, I needed to turn it on its head, and ask about 'changelessness'. How do I explain ITCO's social structural permanence? To do so I needed to open the black box of the projects more than I had done thus far. I was hired as a management consultant. My job was to understand issues of profitability, project control and success. I was not meant to study, and did not have total access to, the nitty-gritty of the projects. But given my personal history at Oracle as a project manager, and before that as an IT consultant, I did talk to the consultants about their work. It emerged that what was contracted for by the clients was almost always functionality that the client could never use if they had to. The projects called for a level of sophistication that ITCO's consultants could not adequately deliver and the clients could not use efficiently. The contracts were simulacra of a high-tech world that only existed in the fantasy of the clients' senior management. Abu Dhabi's hyper-capitalism

pretends to be hypermodern, state-of-the-art, top-notch, etc. In reality the actual work processes, all the way down the line, are mediocre. The pretence to hypermodernity is, just that, a pretence. If you open the black box and look at what functionality gets implemented and used, it is all very basic. Therefore, there was a fundamental disjoint between the contracts and the actual use of the IT. No project delivered what was promised and no client actually needed or wanted what it had contracted. Moreover, the contracts were 'hyper-real'; what was written into them was more real than real. That level of IT was not actually needed, wanted or ever implemented.

Sidney Dekker (2011) has written a complexity book about 'drift'. His claim is that organizations do not so much 'change' as they 'drift'. There is movement from here to there, but it is mostly gradual, imperceptible and surreptitious. Often we only discover change when something suddenly in our perception crashes, i.e. it stops working. Complexity, Dekker asserts, drifts more than it changes. ITCO did drift from small to big and back again and it almost crashed, but not quite. ITCO, as a prestige object of its owner, persists. To be important in Abu Dhabi you have to have businesses. You have to pretend that your wealth is earned and not purely gratuitous. You have to take socially visible action to assert your existential presence. ITCO has to be there to prove that its owner exists. ITCO is more an artefact of social and symbolic capital than an object of economic capital. And none of that has changed. ITCO's president, vice presidents and senior management are the Rosencratz and Guildensterns of the drama. Just as in Hamlet, these are figures that hover around the hero and who only exist in relationship to him. They have no agency of their own and really do not understand the drama about them. They are bit players in someone else's play. That was ITCO's role in regards to its owner. I took ITCO to be a company like any other company, an organization funded to make a profit for its shareholder(s). But I was wrong. ITCO was pre- or post-capitalist, but it was not capitalist. It did not really exist to make a return of 14% on the dollar. I insisted that ITCO was business-as-usual, but it was not and no-one else really believed that it was.

Does ITCO point to our economic future or is it just a freak? ITCO is doing business without scarcity. It shows what happens to a (quasi) modernist organization when the capitalist constraints are withdrawn. Instead of becoming a community and generating beneficial work circumstances, ITCO tended to

degrade into meaninglessness, inefficiency and absurdity. After all, it was selling projects that the clients did not need or want, and it knew that, and it knew that it could never deliver what it supposedly promised. All human integrity and ability to relate seems to have collapsed under the weight of all the simulacra. But everyone profited and no-one wanted either to tell the story or to acknowledge its existence.

Is hyper-capitalism inherently dead and/or deadening? One case obviously does not give us enough data to answer such a sweeping question. Hyper-capitalism, we could imagine, ought to be enthralling. No scarcity; the sky (literally) was the limit. Nevertheless, at ITCO the wealth brought out grasping behavior, ugly opportunism and nihilism. Freed of our dependence on economic capital, social capital simply raised its head all the more strongly. The lack of symbolic capital was crucial; there was no philosophy, politics, debate or spirit. The close to unlimited access to goods and services seemed to paralyze the spirit. If time is measured in our striving for material rewards, making those rewards instantly and almost totally accessible seems to destroy time. And that is deadening.

Hyper-capitalism was in ITCO the 'dead attractor'. In ITCO the simulacra went wild and everyone colluded to keep it that way. Is ITCO a harbinger of what is to come? This economy of excess was definitely not creative, liberal or progressive. Without accountability, imposed by the logic of scarcity, work was ineffective and social relatedness tended towards petty feuds and rivalries. The advantage of the 'dead attractor' thesis above Bourdieu's analysis of habitus is that it remains an attractor. There is still a possibility of motion in the conceptualization. Even if the attractor is 'damping down' all motion, the system could drift into a phase shift. Having fought all my life to escape scarcity, it has been quite a shock to discover that the escape (at least in this case) was not at all what I'd expected it to be. Hyper-capitalist excess turned out to be at least as restricting and unfree as business-as-usual. I had hoped to gain more distance from Mead/Bourdieu by turning to complexity theory. What up to now has emerged at ITCO has not been generative, creative or impressive. Despite the potential of excess, it has not produced a "society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the

evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (Marx & Engels, 1964, p. 53).

Further research is needed to open the black box of the substantive economy of excess without scarcity. Pride of workmanship did not motivate the IT knowledge workers to excellence. Work remained an extrinsic motivator, with less rather than more interest in training, learning and expertise. Management just did not want to know what happened in the primary process of project implementation. There was less leadership rather than more. Management was totally indifferent to excellence or professional pride. The economic anthropology of the UAE now has a beginning. Everything I had learned in my MBA, and thought I ought to do, more or less failed at ITCO. ITCO only destroys shareholder monetary value, but it drifts onward. The professionals deskilled themselves to the lowest common denominator, with no punishment for doing so. Efficiency and effectiveness were flaunted but nobody really cared. Complicated IT systems were partially implemented in a way that most of their functionality was lost, and that suited the end users just fine. In the hyper-capitalism mirror of Abu Dhabi many certainties of business studies falter. Is this the exception that (dis-)proves the rule? Substantive economic anthropology has a long way to go before the results of comparative studies might tell us more about scarcity, excess and the role of so-called business basics. I have taken a small first step, I hope others will follow.

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Abbreviations

BI	Business intelligence and analytics
BPR	Business process re-engineering
CAS	Complex adaptive systems
CRM	Customer relations management
DMS	Document management systems
ERP	Enterprise resource planning
HR	Human resources
HRA	Human resources and administration
HRM	Human resources management
IT	Information Technology
OCM	Organizational change management
RFP	Request for proposal
TQM	Total quality management
UAE	United Arab Emirates
VP	Vice president

DUTCH SUMMARY

'IK', ITCO & HYPERKAPITALISME

Een Onderzoek naar het Uitoefenen van Consultancy in de Golfstaten

Dit boek gaat over verantwoordelijkheid en organisatie in hyperkapitalisme. Kenmerkend aan het hyperkapitalisme is overmaat; oftewel, de afwezigheid van schaarste. Het onderzoek vindt plaats in de Verenigde Arabische Emiraten, gelegen in het Midden-Oosten. De VAE wordt gekenmerkt door een enkelvoudige sector exporteconomie. Olieopbrengsten zijn bijna onbeperkt; alle andere economische activiteiten blijven secundair.

In de formalistische betekenis van economie verkopen mensen iets met marktwaarde om hun bestaansmiddelen te verkrijgen. Het grootste deel van de tijd is er schaarste --- dat betekent dat het inkomen niet aansluit bij de gepercipieerde behoeften.

Aan de andere kant verwijst het substantivistische concept van economie naar de relatie die de mens heeft met natuur en maatschappij 'in zoverre dit resultaat, waarin men wordt voorzien van materiële middelen, voldoening vraagt'.

Mijn onderzoek richt zich op de relatie tussen deze twee concepten. Ik veronderstelde dat bedrijven in de VAE 'spaarzaam' zouden zijn in zowel de formalistische als de substantivistische zin. Ik werkte in een soort economisch paradijs, waar schaarste vrijwel irrelevant was. Maar zoals ik in dit boek aan het licht zal brengen, was dit 'paradijs' niet wat ik dacht dat het zou zijn. Ik zou mijn ervaring kenmerken als dat van een samenleving die 'vast' zit en waar relaties door 'bedrog' worden gekenmerkt.

Er zijn drie contexten in dit boek. De context van Abu Dhabi, waar het grootste deel van het onderzoek plaatsvond, ikzelf als context en de gebruikte onderzoeksmethoden.

Het boek is gebaseerd op een empirische casestudie, wat op zijn beurt weer gebaseerd is op mijn consultancy ervaring in Abu Dhabi. De studie focust zich op ITCO --- de naam die ik geef aan het VAE bedrijf waar ik vele jaren actief

was. Mijn toegang tot ITCO was uitstekend. Ik had toegang tot email materiaal en frequente bezoeken, als mijn bronnen.

Ik noem Abu Dhabi hyperkapitalistisch vanwege de enorm snelle economische groei; van 2001 tot 2008 is het BBP verdriedubbeld. De handel bloeide. Alleen in 2009 was er een jaar crisis, veroorzaakt door een enorme daling in olieverkoop als gevolg van de wereldwijde economische crisis van 2008. De binnenlandse economische activiteit buiten de oliehandel bleef daarna echter groeien. Dit is te zien aan de gigantische bouwprojecten – musea, luchthaventerminals, winkelcentra. Rijkdom wordt gegenereerd en verbruikt op een onovertroffen schaal.

Abu Dhabi is een soort ‘Disneyland’ -- dat wil zeggen, het is kunstmatig, gepland, gedisciplineerd en gedefinieerd door zijn uiterlijk.

Ik ben gevormd door hard werken en strijd. Ik heb een Libanese achtergrond. Ik heb een sterke werkethiek en ben ervan overtuigd dat uitbuiting wenselijk noch duurzaam is. Ik heb altijd moeten werken voor mijn levensonderhoud --- schaarste, als de noodzaak om te werken, als afhankelijk zijn van het hebben van een baan en als gebrek aan sociale en politieke veiligheid, spelen een essentiële rol in mijn leven.

Ik was een ervaren Oracle projectuitvoerder, die al zo’n tien jaar in de regio had gewerkt, maar ik had besloten te verhuizen en me te vestigen in Canada. Voor mij als consultant was de situatie frustrerend en voor mijn professionele trots was het niet erg bevorderlijk. Ik werd echter afdoende betaald en ik mocht vrijwel alles zien wat ik wilde zien, waarschijnlijk omdat ik niet erg belangrijk was. Derhalve was mijn positie ideaal voor het doen van onderzoek. Op deze manier had ik het materiaal dat ik nodig had voor het schrijven van een etnografie over ITCO. ITCO leverde een verhaal: van bloei tot neergang. Enorme groei die plotseling tot stilstand kwam toen de economische crisis ook dit bedrijf bereikte in 2010. ITCO kromp totdat er bijna niets over was. Er was dus drama, maar waren de belangrijkste spelers in dit drama veranderd, aangepast of opnieuw geanalyseerd? Ik kon proberen dat uit te vinden.

Ik noem dit werk etnografie omdat het mijn doel was de overtuigingen en sociale rangschikking van het onderwerp te begrijpen. Verder wilde ik begrijpen hoe zij hun situatie en handelingen ervoeren en begrepen. De studie van een

cultuur als die bij ITCO vergde een bepaald niveau van intimiteit met groepsleden die zich ontwikkelde gedurende de tijd dat ik als actief lid van de groep met hen werkte. De belangrijkste motivatie voor het gebruiken van de etnografische benadering was de overtuiging dat ik alleen door met de actoren binnen ITCO samen te werken, te interacteren en hen te ervaren, dit alles in hun eigen omgeving, hun manier van leven echt kon begrijpen. Ik moest details van het fenomeen onderzoeken die vaak moeilijk over te brengen zijn bij gebruikmaking van kwantitatieve methoden van onderzoek.

Derhalve heb ik geen werkende hypothese geformuleerd of een researchplan opgesteld, waarin interventies en methoden voor het verzamelen van gegevens uit de doeken zijn gedaan. Integendeel, ik heb de kansen die ik in mijn dagelijks werk en in bijeenkomsten met collega's en cliënten kreeg, gebruikt om deel te nemen aan veel verschillende gesprekken.

Toen ik arriveerde bij ITCO had ik te maken met een belangrijk IT bedrijf in de VAE met één miljard dollar winst per jaar, een bedrijf dat beter management nodig had. Het middenmanagement leek onverschillig te staan tegenover de kwaliteit van het opgeleverde werk. ITCO verkocht grote IT (informatietechnologie) implementatieprojecten aan grote spelers in de regio. Denk aan Oracle of SAP tot aan grote banken, vliegvelden en telecombedrijven. Dit waren contracten met een waarde van miljoenen. ITCO importeerde en verkocht ook IT producten van bedrijven als Lenovo, Nokia en Erikson; toentertijd zeker winstgevend.

ITCO kende echter wat problemen en ik werd gevraagd dit te verbeteren. ITCO leverde niet wat aan klanten was beloofd, projecten waren nooit op tijd afgerond, waardoor er bemiddeling of meerwerk aan te pas kwam. Na afronding bleek bijna ieder project verlies te hebben gedraaid! Dus ben ik gevraagd ernaar te kijken en aanbevelingen te doen voor verbetering. Als consultant wilde ik ITCO 'redder': het bedrijf stabiel, winstgevend, effectief en duurzaam maken. Ik wilde dat ITCO een 'goede' plek zou zijn om te werken en een bevredigende omgeving voor de ontwikkeling van de werknemers. Maar het bedrijf verdiende helemaal geen geld. De cashflow van nieuwe projecten bleef binnenkomen, dus op dat vlak waren er geen problemen. En het was pas toen de economische crisis

van 2008 het bedrijf bereikte (in 2010), dat ik gevraagd werd om in detail naar de boeken te kijken. Zo ontdekte ik hoe slecht het er echt voorstond.

Er vonden gedurende een lange tijd diverse ingrepen plaats. Van reorganisatie, training en workshops door externe consultants tot diverse dialoogsessies met managers en de eigenaren uit de VAE. ITCO stond echter onverschillig tegenover mijn doelen als consultant. Zolang de hoeveelheid geld die door het bedrijf stroomde bleef groeien, waren ze content. Dat de handelsvorderingen nog sneller groeiden maakte hen niets uit. Botweg gesteld, ITCO kon objectief gezien bankroet zijn, het management zag zichzelf nog steeds als succesvol. De 'echte' economische situatie bleef onzichtbaar.

Later, werkend aan dit boek, begon ik de dominante cultuur bij ITCO 'bedrog' en 'vastzittend' te noemen. Consultants en (midden)managers beweerden alles, zeiden alles, ongeacht de waarheid, om te kunnen zeggen dat 'alles in orde was'. Er leek weinig tot geen verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel te bestaan. Blijkbaar was er geen angst voor ontdekking of bestraffing. Niemand is ooit ontslagen door de eigen incompetentie. Men scheen er geen problemen mee te hebben te beweren dat een probleem niet hun fout was.

Ongeacht wat ik probeerde aan vaardigheidstrainingen, veranderingen in management of reorganisatie, alles bleef hetzelfde. In wezen, ongeacht wat ik probeerde, bleef ITCO gericht op cash-flow en zonder bewezen succesvolle projecten. Het opgeleverde professionele niveau nam niet noemenswaardig toe. De houding van 'we improviseren wel' zonder zorgvuldigheid, discipline of zorg om de kwaliteit van het resultaat bleef. Het management wist dat projectresultaten niet adequaat waren, maar zolang het geld bleef binnenstromen trok het zich daar niets van aan.

Economische antropologie richt zich meer op Afrika (in werk zoals dat van MarshalSahlins (1972, 2000) of op Europa (zoals in het werk van Paul Jorion (2003) of Luc Boltanski& Eve Chaipello (2007)) dan op de economie van de VAE.

Gebruikmakend van het sociaal interactionisme van Mead en de concepten en theorieën van Bourdieu, probeer ik te begrijpen wat ik met modernistische sociale studies heb omschreven. Eerst probeer ik identiteiten binnen ITCO te begrijpen middels psychologische antropologie en ten tweede vanuit het

perspectief van gezelligheid; hoe identiteit sociaal wordt opgebouwd door relaties. Bourdieu's studies met betrekking tot het economisch, sociaal en cultureel kapitaal hielpen me begrijpen hoe ITCO's actoren al dan niet vertegenwoordigd zijn in symbolisch kapitaal, binnen de specifieke actiegebieden die hun habitus vormen.

Mijn analyse lijkt valide genoeg als een modernistische beschrijving van ITCO. Deze analyses gaven inzicht in de systemen binnen ITCO, waar ITCO op zichzelf redelijk stabiel lijkt. De economische crisis van 2008 bereikte uiteindelijk ITCO en dwong verandering af. Maar verandering, voor zover aanwezig, kwam van buiten en niet van binnen. Het leek erop dat ITCO intern redelijk stabiel was. Gezien het feit dat het nooit echt winst maakte en dat de meeste projecten nooit echt werkten zoals bedoeld, is dit een zeer opvallende conclusie. ITCO is een verhaal over 'toereikend zijn'. Het bleef steeds net genoeg doen om door te gaan, al leek het er sterk op dat dit niet zou lukken.

Buiten het olierijke Midden-Oosten, zou ITCO volgens mij nooit hebben kunnen bestaan zoals het bestaat. De expats waren allemaal in de VAE omdat ze er zoveel meer konden verdienen dan thuis. Op het werk waren managers en consultants sociaal georganiseerd langs etnische lijnen.

Waar er in Europa vakbonden, politieke partijen of andere vormen van sociale samenhang zijn, is er in de VAE alleen iemands expat status en etnische identiteit.

Sociaal kapitaal heeft voor het overleven hiervan gezorgd, maar waarom heeft de VAE eigenaar bedrijven gesticht die hij, vervolgens, min of meer heeft genegeerd? Dat expat-managers en -consultants geen toewijding hebben aan de instituties van Abu Dhabi is logisch genoeg. De Golfstaten behandelen expats als dure arbeid. Ze hebben geen rechten, worden uitgesloten bij alle besluitvorming, en hebben geen reden om zichzelf burger te voelen. Hun enige sociale betrokkenheid is door middel van consumptie.

Maar de conclusie dat vormen van kapitaal, en hoe deze onderling en met de omstandigheden verbonden zijn, bepalen wat we kunnen zien en weten van ITCO, is niet erg bevredigend. In ieder geval vernietigt het de relatie tussen schaarste en overmaat als belangrijke factor. Schaarste en overmaat zijn

gereduceerd bij Bourdieu tot aspecten als vormen van kapitaal. ITCO is van een levend fenomeen gereduceerd naar een epiphenomena van het spel der vormen van kapitaal.

Toch is ITCO op een of andere manier veranderd, de analyse is niet verkeerd of fout, maar ik wilde dichter bij ITCO zijn en de mensen die daar 'leefden'.

Om dit te bereiken, wendde ik mij tot de studie van de dynamiek, over sociale gebeurtenissen als verandering en beweging. Ik heb gebruik gemaakt van de sociale complexiteitstheorie. De complexiteitstheorie verklaart dat er meerdere soorten attractoren zijn, die direct en causaal kunnen zijn ('a leidt direct tot b'), circulair of polair (herhalend), of onvoorspelbaar. Het is de emergente attractor als een sociale en historische transformatie wat het meest interessant is. Het toont aan dat het nieuwe zal gebeuren, dat verandering plaatsvindt.

Bij toepassing van de complexiteitstheorie kan men concluderen dat ITCO niet voldeed aan een dekpuntattractor of een directe attractor, noch aan circulaire attractoren. We zien dat, hoewel de economische 'boom' van de VAE een cruciaal contextueel element in de ITCO casus vormde, attitudes en reacties niet simpelweg een gevolg waren van de economie van de overvloed. Het hyperkapitalisme in de VAE mag dan wel een kleine oprisping hebben doorgemaakt in 2008, er was geen sprake van een crisis.

ITCO onderging een mini-crisis maar bestaat vandaag de dag nog steeds, hoewel in een kleinere vorm. De attitudes en aannames van de managers en consultants bij ITCO (of diegenen die niet langer bij ITCO werkzaam zijn), zijn niet veranderd of ontwikkeld, ik zie slechts herhaling zonder verschil. Het leven in het hyperkapitalisme is niet verstoord, noch heeft een van de spelers enige economische of politieke kritiek over de 'boom-jaren' te berde gebracht.

Derhalve had ITCO ofwel geen attractor, min of meer zou hetgeen betekenen dat het zich in een entropische staat bevond, dat er sprake was van een naderende dood, of het had een zeer vreemde attractor. Een vreemde attractor zal het niet zijn geweest. ITCO was niet oncontroleerbaar geworden, integendeel, het bedrijf was sociaal zeer gestructureerd. De 'slinksheid' waarmee consultants me vertelden dat projecten uitstekend verliepen terwijl ze een rommeltje waren of dat men me liet denken dat risicoanalyse werd toegepast terwijl deze al lang in de prullenbak was beland, vervulde mij met afschuw. Ik

was kwaad. Maar de ‘slinksheid’ was een vast, stabiel en voortdurend herhalend patroon. Ik zag het gebrek aan verandering of echte ontwikkeling van het bedrijf als ‘vastzitten’, maar ITCO maakte nog meer dan tien jaar een bloeiperiode door.

Bedrijven en organisaties die waarschijnlijk geen echte behoefte hadden aan Oracle, Siebel of SAP kregen versies hiervan die slechts deels werkten. Maar zodra een project was ‘afgerond’ kon een ander beginnen. Al deze IT contracten werden net zo zeer door prestige gedreven als dat ze gebaseerd waren op werkelijke behoeften. De sociale complexiteitstheorie heeft drie verschillende concepten gedefinieerd. Het concept van Letiche en Lissack dat vraagt om complexe dialoog; Dekker (2011) vraagt om geïntensiverde diversiteit en Cilliers (2007) vraagt om een traagheidsethiek. Geen van drieën is van toepassing op mijn casus. Letiche en Lissack denken dat geleefde (versus toegeschreven) emergentie, aannames, woordenschat en bewustzijn destabiliseert.

Tijdens de dialoogsessies bij ITCO waren managers bezorgd over wat hun kinderen leerden en zouden worden. Het aan een volgende generatie doorgeven van vaardigheden en bewustzijn was een issue voor hen. Maar wel voor elk van hen apart. Ze deelden geen gemeenschappelijke zorgen, plannen of ideeën. Op geen enkel moment dachten ze zelfs maar aan het delen van hun zorgen of het bedenken van gezamenlijke actie. Zij leefden als individuen. Er was geen ‘wij’. Volgens Letiche en Lissack bieden geschiedenis en omstandigheden constant verschillende mogelijkheden en acties. Organisaties en gemeenschappen, stellen zij, veranderen daadwerkelijk en zij noemen die verandering ‘emergentie’. En ze beweren dat het leven met en tijdens een periode van ‘emergentie’ noodzakelijk is voor de potentie van verandering om menselijkerwijs begrijpelijk te kunnen worden gemaakt.

Maar de belangrijkste factor in mijn casus was dat ongeacht hoeveel sociale of economische verandering er in de omgeving was, de mensen en de organisatie het bestaan ervan ontkenden. Iedereen is er nog steeds, nog steeds gefocust op het profiteren van het hyperkapitalisme. Er hebben geen kritische gesprekken plaatsgevonden en het lijkt er niet op dat deze nog gaan komen. Dekker beweert dat verandering en emergentie het best kunnen worden bereikt door diversiteit te bevorderen en diversiteit tot een activiteit te maken. In de VAE is er zeker

genoeg diversiteit, evenals binnen ITCO. Maar beiden bestaan door het ontkennen van de diversiteit en het weigeren deze te erkennen.

De traagheidsethiek van Cillier beargumenteert dat in non-lineaire emergente werkelijkheden, kleine individuele acties of gebeurtenissen een groot verschil kunnen maken. Maar binnen ITCO is er geen individuele creativiteit, de focus ligt op onmiddellijke rijkdom. Iedereen, apart en los van de anderen doet hetzelfde.

Wat Letiche-Lissack, Dekker en Cilliers allen gemeen hebben is dat ze complexiteit identificeren als tijd, geschiedenis, stroming en verandering. Zij veronderstellen een Europees concept voor tijd, gebeurtenis en vooruitgang. Maar dit perspectief werkt niet binnen ITCO. De VAE is in wezen zonder geschiedenis, er waren nomaden zonder vastgelegde geschiedenis, en nu is er hyperkapitalisme.

Ondanks veranderingen in zijn zakelijke omgeving, bleef ITCO op het gebied van zijn sociale rationaliteit hetzelfde. Zelfs nu, na inkrimping en verlies van de standing, lijken de consultants en managers die er nog zijn, nog steeds hetzelfde te denken en handelen als tien jaar geleden. Ook hun begrip van zichzelf en anderen is in die tijd niet veranderd. Ondanks de uitdagingen van het hyperkapitalisme, een economische 'boom' zoals de wereld zelden zag, was er geen creativiteit. De plaatselijke bewoners ontwierpen niets, kwamen niet met voorstellen, maakten niets dat nieuw of uniek was. Abu Dhabi kocht spullen uit Amerika en Europa. Uiteindelijk kochten ze zelfs toparchitectuur en topmusea. Bijvoorbeeld het Frank Gehry Guggenheim en Jean Nouvel Louvre, maar geen van deze is op dit moment open. Het lijken pure prestigeobjecten te zijn, zonder link naar de lokale gemeenschap.

Dus wat voor attractor past bij ITCO, als er überhaupt een is? In alle bovenstaande casussen typeren de attractoren de voortgang door de tijd. Maar wat als er geen tijd is. Ik stel dat ITCO en hyperkapitalisme tijdloze constructen zijn. Daarom was Bourdieu ook zo toepasbaar. Ondanks zijn marxistische erfgoed was Bourdieu in wezen een modernistische structuralist. En zijn manier om naar ITCO te kijken zou zijn als kijken naar een structuur, ofwel een systeem.

Er is weinig tot geen sociale mobiliteit in Abu Dhabi. Het uiterlijk verschijningsbeeld van de stad veranderde dramatisch, maar de menselijke conditie was vast en rigide. Er heerst een symbolische stasis in Abu Dhabi.

ITCO groeide, verdween bijna en bestaat nu voort als schaduw van wat het ooit was. Er is geen symbolisch kapitaal, dat wil zeggen: als niemand er op let, over schrijft, het analyseert, bediscussieert en erover debatteert, bevindt ITCO zich niet in de tijd. Het maakt geen deel uit van een verhaal dat voor iemand van belang is.

En de mensen binnen ITCO zien het zo; en ze zien zichzelf op die manier binnen ITCO. ITCO wordt gekarakteriseerd door een dode attractor. Globalisatie en post-industrialisme maken de samenleving complex. Ze zijn vormen van toegevoegde complexiteit, onderlinge verbondenheid en holistische interactie. Maar ITCO wil niets van dit alles.

In theorie is de ‘dode attractor’ een belangrijke ontdekking. De complexiteitstheorie mag danodeloos optimistisch zijn geweest door slechts (post-)modernistische attractoren te bekijken, waarin tijd leeft en beweegt, ITCO was (en is) zinloos. Het wil ook niets van doen hebben met ‘zingeving’. Het wil het niet weten. Voor de medewerkers was ITCO een machine die rijkdom produceerde.

De enige persoon in dit boek die boos, bezorgd, gepassioneerd en bereid tot actie was, was ikzelf.

Hoe moet ik ITCO dan verklaren? Om dit te doen moet ik de zwarte doos van de projecten openen, ofwel wat ITCO dag en nacht deed. Het was niet de bedoeling dat ik de dagelijkse beslommingen van de projecten bestudeerde en ik had er ook niet echt toegang toe. Ik praatte met de consultants over hun werk. Het bleek dat wat er contractueel met klanten was afgesproken bijna altijd functionaliteit was die de klant niet zou kunnen gebruiken op het moment dat dit nodig was. De projecten vroegen om een niveau van geavanceerdheid dat de consultants van ITCO niet echt konden leveren, en de klanten niet konden gebruiken. De contracten waren een schijnbeeld van een high-tech wereld die alleen bestond in de fantasie van het hogere management van de klant. Het hyperkapitalisme van Abu Dhabi pretendeert hypermodern, state-of-the-art,

top-notch, etcetera, te zijn, maar de eigenlijke werkprocessen, door de gehele lijn, zijn middelmatig. De schijn van hypermoderniteit is precies dat: schijn. Als je de zwarte doos opent en kijkt naar de functionaliteit die wordt geïmplementeerd en gebruikt, is het allemaal zeer basaal. Er was dus een fundamentele afstand tussen de contracten en het daadwerkelijk gebruik van de technologie. De contracten waren derhalve ‘hyper-echt’, wat erin geschreven stond was echter dan de werkelijkheid. Dat niveau van IT was niet echt nodig, gewenst, en werd nooit geïmplementeerd.

Sidney Dekker heeft een complexiteitsboek geschreven over ‘afdrijven’ (Dekker, 2011). Zijn bewering is dat organisaties niet zo zeer ‘veranderen’ als wel ‘afdrijven’. Er is beweging van hier naar daar, maar die beweging is meestal gradueel, onmerkbaar en heimelijk. Vaak ontdekken we verandering alleen als iets in onze perceptie ineens crasht, ofwel stopt met werken. Complexiteit, zo verzekert Dekker ons, drijft meer af dan ze verandert. ITCO dreef af, van klein naar groot en weer terug en het bedrijf crashte bijna, maar niet helemaal. ITCO als prestigeobject van de eigenaar blijft bestaan. Om belangrijk te zijn in Abu Dhabi heb je bedrijven nodig. Je dient te doen alsof je rijkdom verdiend is, en niet volledig ongerechtvaardigd.

ITCO is er om te bewijzen dat de eigenaar bestaat. ITCO is meer een artefact van sociaal en symbolisch kapitaal dan een object van economisch kapitaal. Expats hebben geen eigen vertegenwoordiging en begrijpen het drama hieromtrent niet. ITCO was slechts een speler zonder eigen vertegenwoordiging. Ik veronderstelde dat ITCO een bedrijf als andere bedrijven was, een organisatie opgericht om winst voor zijn aandeelhouder(s) te genereren. Maar ik zat fout. ITCO was pre- of post-kapitalistisch, maar niet kapitalistisch. Het bestond niet daadwerkelijk om een ROI van 14% op een dollar te genereren.

Wijst ITCO op onze economische toekomst of is het een freak? ITCO doet zaken zonder schaarsheid. Het toont aan wat er gebeurt met een (quasi) modernistische organisatie als de kapitalistische beperkingen worden teruggetrokken. In plaats van het verworden tot een gemeenschap en voordelige werkomstandigheden te creëren, verzandde ITCO in betekenisloosheid, inefficiëntie en absurditeit. Alle menselijke integriteit en relativiseringsvermogen lijken ineens te zijn geklapt onder het gewicht van alle schijnbeelden. Maar

iedereen profiteerde en niemand wilde het verhaal vertellen of het bestaan ervan erkennen.

Is het hyperkapitalisme intrinsiek dood en/of dodelijk? Eén casus geeft ons uiteraard niet genoeg data om een dergelijke veelomvattende vraag te beantwoorden. Hyperkapitalisme kunnen we ons voorstellen als boeiend. Geen schaarste; 'the sky (letterlijk) was the limit'. Maar bij ITCO bracht de rijkdom graaigedrag, lelijk opportunisme en nihilisme tevoorschijn. Bevrijd van onze afhankelijkheid van economisch kapitaal, stak sociaal kapitaal simpelweg nog duidelijker de kop op. Het gebrek aan symbolisch kapitaal was cruciaal. Er was geen filosofie, politiek, debat of levenskracht. De bijna onbeperkte toegang tot goederen en diensten scheen de levenskracht te verlammen. Als tijd gemeten wordt in ons streven naar materiele beloningen, lijkt het onmiddellijk en vrijwel totaal toegankelijk maken van deze beloningen de tijd te vernietigen. En dat is dodelijk.

Bij ITCO was hyperkapitalisme de 'dode attractor'. Binnen ITCO sloegen de schijnbeelden op hol en spande iedereen samen om het zo te houden. Deze economie van overvloed was zeker niet creatief of progressief. Zonder rekenschap, opgelegd door de logica van schaarste, was werk ineffectief en neigde sociale verbondenheid naar kleinzielige vetes en rivaliteiten.

Het voordeel van de 'dode attractor' theorie boven Bourdieu's analyse van reproductie en habitus is dat het een attractor blijft. Er is nog steeds een mogelijkheid van beweging in de conceptualisatie. Zelfs als de attractor alle beweging blokkeert, kan het systeem afdrijven richting een faseverschuiving. Na mijn hele leven gevochten te hebben om schaarste te ontvluchten, was het een flinke schok om te ontdekken dat die ontsnapping niet datgene was wat ik ervan verwacht had. Hyperkapitalistische overvloed bleek minstens zo beperkend en onvrij te zijn als business-as-usual. Ik hoopte meer afstand te scheppen tot Mead/Bourdieu door me tot de complexiteitstheorie te wenden. Maar wat tot nu toe tevoorschijn kwam bij ITCO was niet generatief, creatief of indrukwekkend.

Verder onderzoek is noodzakelijk om de zwarte doos van de substantivistische economie van overvloed zonder schaarste te openen. De trots op hun vakmanschap motiveerde de IT kenniswerkers niet naar excellente resultaten.

Het management wilde eenvoudigweg niet weten wat er in het primaire proces van projectimplementatie gebeurde. De economische antropologie van de VAE heeft nu een begin. Alles wat ik geleerd heb in mijn MBA en wat ik dacht te moeten doen, mislukte min of meer. ITCO vernietigt slechts geldelijke waarde voor aandeelhouders, maar drijft voort. In de hyperkapitalistische spiegel van Abu Dhabi wankelen veel zekerheden van bedrijfswetenschappen. Is dit de uitzondering die de regel bevestigt, of weerlegt?

About the author

Samir Makarem was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela in 1957, and lives in Canada, he is married and has three children. Samir graduated with a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and a master's degree in business administration. Samir has been a consultant for more than fifteen years.

Samir became a manager more than twenty years ago, working with IT (information technology) companies distributing products and implementing systems and solutions in the Middle East. He established himself as a manager with a focus to grow business market share and expand into new products and markets in the Gulf States. Between 1981 and 1987, he had worked for small companies with few employees and later in 1993 he started working for larger companies, such as Oracle, a company of over ten thousands employees. During those years he worked in systems design, development and implementing business solutions across several industries.

Samir acquired his organizational management skills while working at Oracle between 1994 and 2003, and later while working in Canada. Approximately for the last ten years, Samir has been focusing on business transformations and organizational change management projects in the UAE and Canada. He has implemented several change management projects in re-organization, organizational expansion, performance management systems and IT implementations. Early in 2009 he conducted several turn-around consulting projects after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008.

Throughout his career, Samir had developed a sense of 'doing the right things' for organizational success. However, Samir had re-developed his understanding of reality in organizations culminating in this research.

'ME', ITCO and HYPER-CAPITALISM

A Study of Doing Consultancy in the Gulf State

'Me', ITCO and Hyper-capitalism is a book about responsibility and organization in hyper-capitalism. Hyper-capitalism is characterized by excess; that is, the absence of scarcity. The research takes place in the United Arab Emirates, located in the Middle East where oil revenues are almost unlimited; all other economic activities remain secondary.

The book explores the relationship between formal and substantive economics. It is a story of a hyper-stratified society, where every class and group is assigned a place on the social ladder, which is meant to be immobile. It is a sort of 'Disneyland' -- that is, it is artificial, planned, regimented and defined by its appearances. Wealth is generated and consumed on a scale unheard of elsewhere. The ethnography describes what happens to a (quasi) modernist organization when the capitalist constraints are withdrawn. ITCO was in some trouble and several consulting interventions were implemented to improve matters. The ethnography reveals a dominant work culture of 'guile' and 'stuck-ness'; a lack of change. ITCO 'flourished' for more than ten years, declaring profits to its shareholders year after year. ITCO was doing business without scarcity.

In the hyper-capitalism mirror of the UAE many certainties of business studies falter. Is this the exception that (dis-)proves the rule? Does ITCO point to our economic future or is it a freak? Is hyper-capitalism inherently dead and/or deadening?

Through the lens of Mead's social interactionism, the analysis reveals the identities in ITCO via psychological anthropology; how identity is socially constructed in interrelationships. Applying Bourdieu's theories and concepts the analysis attempts to reveal the 'stuck-ness' and whether ITCO's actants are (or are not) represented in symbolic capital. But such analysis destroys the relationship between scarcity and excess. The question remains as to how we should understand ITCO? ITCO did change somehow, and to understand this change, social complexity theory is used to reveal the kind of attractor that emerges producing the pattern of behaviour that is characteristic of ITCO.

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