

Human Resource Management Practices in Private Sector Organisations in Pakistan: Study of Cultural Influences

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Abstract

This study presents findings of in-depth interviews from ?core-informants? from private sector organisations in Pakistan. Study identified that the impact of national cultural factors such as collectivism and high power distance have a strong influence on human resource management (HRM) practices and retaining competitive advantage at work. This study also revealed that sifarish (i.e. connection), sycophancy and nepotism are critical factors in HRM functioning. Typically organisations are hierarchically structured with unquestionable authority vested in either management or proprietor. The current investigation also found out that managerial support for sifarish or connection-based recruitment, selection and promotions practices are some of the main factors affecting to the development of HRM systems in private business sectors. Training and development practices are given little importance with absence of linkage between performance appraisal reward and promotions. The important implications for policy makers and heads of private organisations are discussed in the last section.

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Index terms— HRM, competitive advantage, national culture, private sector organisations, Pakistan.

1 Introduction

The article contributes to ongoing debate of understanding HRM and national culture in Asian developing countries in the field of international human resource management (IHRM). Recent research has shown keen interest in understanding peoplemanagement perspectives in Asian countries (Budhwar & Debrah, 2009; ??hu et al. 2007). Some studies emphasized the need to examine historical, religious, cultural and ethnic perspectives on people-management in cross national contexts ??Adler, 1983;Stehle & Erwee, 2007;Styhre, 2002). However, the literature on the current state of HRM in private sector organisations in Pakistan is limited and cross-cultural research has also ignored the area under investigation (Aycan, et al. 2000;Khilji, 2003). Table 1 presents brief summary of the literature on HRM published in context of Pakistan. Consequently, this study investigated the impact of cultural factors on HRM in private sector in Pakistan through employing in-depth interviews. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) private sector is the biggest contributor to country's GDP and is also the biggest provider of employment opportunities to the nation. The private sector in Pakistan grew rapidly during 1990s privatization, deregulation and liberalisation programmes. The former military regime of President Pervez Musharraf also continued the pace and focussed major structural, governance, and economic reforms to encourage the private sector to become the growth engine in the economy ??ADB report, 2008). Currently, over 77 percent of the commercial banking sector, all of the textile and telecommunications sectors, and significant parts of the cement, sugar, automobile, and fertilizer sectors are privately owned. The private sector also contributes to power generation and electricity distribution (Bajoria, 2009).

At the same time, the infrastructural constraints, corruption, weak intellectual property rights, civil-military and landed and a feudal systems and discriminatory employment practices are some of the major cultural bottlenecks preventing a more effective and vibrant private sector in the country. Moreover, a transparent and merit-based HRM systems unbiased to any ethnic and religious has not evolved across the government and

44 private sector in the country. Although successive governments have attracted foreign direct investment from
45 \$559 million in 2003 to over \$8 billion in 2007, decreasing to just over \$5 billion in 2008 following political turmoil
46 in the country. However, increased violence in recent years has made the private sector more reluctant to invest.
47 Growing militant violence and resulting instability have been major concerns for both domestic and international
48 investors (Bajoria, 2009). The current volatile environment has roots deep in the colonial and postcolonial history
49 of the country. Pakistan-a quasi-religion state emerged in 1947 from the womb of British Raj and later joined
50 alliance with United States during Cold War era and currently its relationship with US in post-9/11 profoundly
51 informed its national culture and management practices. The extant literature especially on the development of
52 HRM in the country suggests it has been passing through an evolutionary phase Khilji (2003) and Jamil (2005).
53 The review of literature suggests that cultural factors such as collectivism, high power distance, hierarchical
54 authority, sifaris (i.e. connection), cronyism and corruption play crucial role in HRM across business sectors in
55 the and international donors as General Musharaf promised to bring about moderation and transformation of
56 society and enterprises (Behuria, 2009; Cohen & Chollet, 2007). As a frontline state in the so-called 'global war
57 on terror', private sector in Pakistan has both unique opportunities and threats to its business community, at
58 home and abroad. Given this situation, it is surprising that little empirical research has been undertaken that
59 investigates HRM practices in this environment. Thus, the research problem to be investigated in this study is:
60 What are the important cultural factors influencing HRM functioning in private (local) sector organisations in
61 Pakistan?

62 2 II.

63 3 Literature Review

64 Human resource management can be conceptualized as a response by management to the interplay of internal and
65 external forces. Human factor at work is considered to be directly controlled by managers than other resources.
66 The competitive advantage of the small company, in turn, is determined by human resource management of the
67 company.

68 4 a) Competitive advantage

69 Competitive advantage for a business is to have a relatively greater strength regarding the important factor such
70 as human than its competitors. Strengths may be considered in terms of visionary and capable leadership, trained
71 and skilled, dedicated employees and flexible organizational policies. Knowledge of the company's capabilities and
72 of the causes of the competitive forces will highlight the areas where the company should confront competition
73 and where it should avoid it (Porter, 1979). Porter proposed the value chain as the major tool for identifying
74 potential sources of value enhancement. Human resource management is a support activity that occurs throughout
75 all primary activities, such as operations, logistics, marketing and sales and services (Porter, 1985). Having
76 competence is not enough. The company must create superior competence in order to attain a sustainable
77 competitive advantage (Kotler, 1991).

78 Human Resource Management: According to diagnostic approach (Milkovich and Boudreau, 1994), HRM can
79 be divided in a process of four phases: (a) assessing the external conditions for HRM, (b) setting objectives,
80 (c) choosing a course of activities to achieve the objectives, such as external staffing and selection, employee
81 development and training, compensation, internal staffing and employee/labour relations, (d) Evaluating results.
82 According to Wright, ??cMahan and McWilliams (1994) the source of sustained competitive advantage lies in the
83 human resources themselves, not the practices used to attract, utilize and retain them. Human resource (HR)
84 practices aid in developing human resources as a source of sustained competitive advantage through creating
85 and developing a highquality human capital pool. HR practices moderate the relationship between the human
86 capital pool and sustained competitive advantage such that the capital pool results in sustained competitive
87 advantage only when matched with appropriate HR practices that elicit productive employee behaviour. Wright,
88 McMahan and Williams emphasize that in dynamic environments, firms with higher levels of human capital
89 resources possess a greater ability to respond to environmental changes through sensing the need for change,
90 developing strategies to meet the change and quickly and efficiently implementing these strategies. It is recognised
91 ??Boxall 1994; Schneider & Barsoux, 1997; Tayeb, 1995 ??ayeb, , 2001;;Khilji 2003) that HRM practices are
92 evolving at different rates, in cross-national work settings especially in developing countries. Thus, Eastern HRM
93 policies and practices (predominantly from the US) are being adopted in developing countries, albeit, modified
94 to accommodate cultural sensitivities due to local socioeconomic, political and religious factors (Schneider &
95 Barsoux, 1997; ??ayeb, 2001). ??oxall (1994)

96 5 b) Relevance of HRM-cultural research with Pakistan

97 Although Khilji (2002Khilji (, 2003 ??hilji (, 2004) has contributed some of exciting studies relevant to
98 the subject under investigation. However, her view on how British colonial employment policies inherited in
99 postcolonial Pakistan and also the role of colonial legacy-civil-military and landed elites has been unclear. In
100 addition, the non-meritocratic behavioural traits of sycophancy and flattery towards superiors have evolved
101 (Hussain 1999; ??slam 2004) and these persist in government, private sector enterprises and MNCs in Pakistan.

102 These factors coupled with nepotism negatively impact merit-based HRM policies and practices. In such a
103 culture, success is predominantly linked to sifarish, (guanxi i.e. connection), sycophancy, intrigue, duplicity and
104 unquestioning obedience to authority (Khilji 2003; ??slam 2004). Government and most of the private sector still
105 maintain colonial structured hierarchies, bureaucratic management systems and have high power distance with
106 large communication gap between management and employees (Kazi, 2003;Khilji 2003; ??slam 2004). Figure ??
107 presents framework of powerlessness and powerlessness proposed by Khilji (2003) portrays the 'vicious' circle of
108 HRM systems in Pakistani organisations.

109 Figure ?? : A vicious circle of HRM (Khilji, 2003) The network of power relationships in Pakistani society that
110 is reflected in organisational settings has roots in the colonial legacy of the civil-military and landed elite. After
111 independence, in 1947, the momentum of transformation was checked by hegemonic particular ethnic groups in
112 the civil-military services. This adversely affected the fabric of society and resulted in tribal, clannish, linguistic
113 and regional (ethno-national) affiliations that influenced the governance and management of the country and
114 enterprises in Pakistan (Alavi 1990 Research Method Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that cultural research
115 is historical, self-reflective, critical and interdisciplinary therefore it should take into account religion, politics,
116 economic dynamism and every day discourses. According to Denzin and Lincoln qualitative methodology has
117 more flexible research design to examine social world than other methodological designs. This study, therefore,
118 chose qualitative research design in preference to quantitative design to probe the research question at length. In
119 light of the literature review and research question interview schedule was designed. Participants were extensively
120 probed about the cultural difficulties they encountered in the functioning of HRM. In the end of interview, every
121 participant was asked to rate on the cultural variables and their impact on HRM policy and practice. All
122 interviews were conducted face to face and taped with prior consent of respondents. The length of interviews
123 ranges between 50 to 90 minutes on average at the discretion of respondents. The longest interview with general
124 manager HRM continued for 120 minutes and the shortest interview with Sr. HR business partner lasted for 25
125 minutes. All interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed (Kvale, 2007).

126 **6 IV. Data Analysis a) Demographic information**

127 In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty four 'core-informants' from nine private sector organisations. A
128 careful attention was paid to have sample (interviewees) from different age groups, educational background, career
129 track, ethnic groups and from different levels of management including union activists. Private sector companies
130 in the sample included from oil industry, banking, manufacturing and information and communication technology.
131 The respondents managerial levels were consisted of toplevel, middle-level and first line (e.g., supervisory level
132 or immediate boss) from all organisations.

133 **7 b) Major findings**

134 The key findings emerged from the qualitative data include organizational structures seem to be bureaucratic
135 and hierarchical with higher power distance and collectivist orientated. The element of sifarish (i.e. connection)
136 is widely prevalent in private sector. Sycophancy, nepotism and lack of affirmative action policies are common
137 in all organizational settings. Following section presents main findings and discussion from in-depth interviews.

138 **8 c) HRM functioning in a cultural perspective**

139 The extant literature suggests that the major factors of national culture that impinge upon functioning of
140 HRM include collectivism, high power distance, distrusting relationships between supervisor and subordinate,
141 bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational structures and sifarish (Khilji, 2003; ??slam, 2004). The in-depth
142 interviews with senior executives and top HR managers in private sector organisations extensively probed as to
143 how these cultural factors hinder transparent and merit-based principles of HRM. The current empirical evidence
144 supports the findings of earlier studies and further reveals two extremes of workplace reality. The first extreme
145 represents the elitist and imperialist mind-set of Pakistani private sector proprietors and managers, who support
146 hierarchical and bureaucratic organisational structures with high power distance and consider office/organisation
147 as their fiefdom. The second extreme relates to the fact that employees consider themselves as powerless, and
148 ready to be very submissive and always obliging with fear for future consequences. In the words of a general
149 manager (GM) of HRM: 'Culturally, employees (i.e. subordinates) hesitate to say 'NO' to [the] boss or do not
150 afford to have conflict with [the] supervisor in any case. Honestly, we (i.e. bosses) do not want to listen 'NO'
151 from our subordinates. In case of conflict, employees live under higher degree of stress and anxiety and fear
152 for future consequences. Although, union activists pretend to represent employees' voices, on the contrary, they
153 make deals with management and serve their personal interests. This is how employees lose their power, voice
154 and representation.'

155 One newly recruited manager gave similar expressions and said:

156 'If an employee dares to say 'no' to [the] boss or dares to have conflict with [the] boss, he or she expects
157 job termination, transfer to other cities, withholding of annual increment, bonus, misreporting on appraisal and
158 creating obstacles in the way of promotion and career at the same time'.

159 The empirical evidence suggests that strong bureaucratic and hierarchical culture across organisations is
160 one of the major hurdles to development of merit-based HRM private sector. Moreover, there appeared a

161 generation gap in the mindsets and attitudes of older employees which seem more deeply rooted in cultural
162 customs and traditions, whereas younger employees, educated in Americanstyle education institutions (business
163 schools), looked more welcoming to modern and Western style HRM ??Khilji, 2004). Although private sector
164 organisations have began realizing the importance of modern and Westernoriented HRM practices, organisations
165 lack trained HR managers (Jamil, 2005). On the contrary, the success stories of HRM practices of MNCs present
166 role models for both government and private sector firms. Many sample organisations did not have independent
167 HRM department to formulate HR policies and direct practices which sometimes cause frustration to key talented
168 employees ??Khilji & Wang, 2007).Some participants including a GM, a deputy general manager of HRM and
169 GM organisational development (OD) and a retired army Major heading HRM, through hold very high position
170 in the organisation, seemed less ready to accept change in HRM practices and feel it 'unnecessary'. More or less
171 everyone agreed to continue with status-quo and they perceive system 'goes accordingly'. The most important
172 element in HRM departments in Pakistani organisations is that people at the level of GM and Head of HRM
173 do not bother to challenge the status quo and do not suggest to board of directors (BODs), Managing Directors
174 (MDs) or Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) how the HRM function can be a strategic business partner of the
175 organisation. The major reasons for such passive attitudes are exposed by empirical evidence that HR managers
176 are not well trained as HR managers. HRM department is either controlled by Finance or Marketing department
177 in most of organisations as a result HR practices are traditionally carried out with little importance. Training
178 and development have been given less importance and considered as expenditure than investment (Khilji, 2003).
179 All participant companies share some common features such as imperialist management style and management
180 considers themselves as assets and employees as liabilities. Senior managers criticize young employees who are
181 much more aware of modern and Western HRM practices. Whereas younger generation is ready to adopt new
182 ways of doing things and believe that modern HR trends are more progressive and efficient. Young employees
183 believe more in culture of mentoring and employee recognition.

184 **9 d) Employee involvement and participation**

185 Empirical evidence reveals that elitist mindsets and hierarchical organisational structure are common which barely
186 tolerate employee unionism and affairs of the company are at the discretion of the proprietor. Management and
187 employees have severe grievances and problems with each other and formal grievance procedure at organisational
188 level appeared very inactive. A senior manager in response to 'why union activism seems ineffective in your
189 organisation', said there are several examples when union activists stripped a human resource manager, for
190 example in 1990s that happened in United Bank of Pakistan (UBL). He further said: "bullying, harassing,
191 abusing, beating and humiliating have been extremely common practices in recent decades in the government
192 corporations in Pakistan". He further justified by saying that "on the grounds of the negative role of unions in
193 government sector organisations, the military regime of General Musharraf banned them in 2000".

194 The other extreme, i.e. employees, complain that management have been discriminatory with them and have
195 different policies for different people. One manager complained that senior management has different policies for
196 different people. He further said that management cannot 'do' until they are forced. Participants were probed
197 on the mechanisms and procedures by which they invite employee involvement and participation in decision
198 making but no such evidence was cited by any participant. In view of the above discussion it can be inferred
199 that management is believes in bureaucratic authoritative management style and organisational structure is so
200 hierarchical that it leaves little chance for employee involvement and participation. Therefore, it is implied that
201 discouraged employees and union activists reciprocate by forcing and harassing management to get their work
202 done. e) Culture of sifarish, sycophancy and cronyism

203 The review of literature identified that the presence of sifarish (i.e. guanxi or connection), nepotism and
204 sycophancy are major cultural threats to merit-based HRM functioning in the country (Khilji, 2003; ??slam
205 2004;Ismail, 1999). Consequently, the present study attempts to address this cultural dimension. The present
206 empirical evidence discovers that 'sifarish', nepotism and sycophancy have been identified as major cultural
207 factors impairing smooth development of HRM practices in private sector organisations. In-depth interviews
208 with a number of participants from top management to first line management and nonmanagement employees
209 reveal mixed response. Some respondents believe that those people who have strong connection, i.e. sifarish,
210 or those employees who are close to management or proprietor of the business or such people who get close to
211 management or proprietor through sycophancy get more favours in recruitment and selection, promotion, transfer,
212 appraisal and jump career ladder quickly. Some respondents believe that merit and individual performance is
213 more important for promotion, reward. Based on these findings it can also be inferred that affirmative action
214 policies, organisational

215 **10 2012**

216 April justices, i.e. procedural and distributive, and merit are yet in infancy in private sector organisation in the
217 country. A senior manager in HRM department said: "We can't rule out the possibility of nepotism, cronyism
218 and favouritism because these are cultural malaise in Pakistan and for that we have to be a little brave to adjust
219 to cultural norms but every employee has to go through ??the] proper procedure of recruitment and selection,
220 appraisal".

221 Another respondent expressed: "The dishonest culture, sycophancy, cronyism and corruption are deep rooted
222 in society, and our organisation is part of this society, so we can't escape. Sifarish can come from any quarters of
223 civil-military, landed or political person for recruitment, selection, promotion, transfer and reward. Nevertheless,
224 we have to run the show and merit is also done so that good people are selected. But that depends again on the
225 political era. That's very important because political regimes have roots deep in [the] masses and people expect
226 jobs from them so whenever there is recruitment and selection HR manager under stress".

227 He current empirical evidence supports the proposition that 'sifarish culture, (connections and contacts) plays
228 a significant role in recruitment, selection, promotion, appraisal, reward and benefits practices in private sector
229 like government organisations. Moreover, the empirical evidence also suggests that the 'Seth' i.e. proprietor or
230 owner of the company enjoys unquestionable authority and no one could dare to argue or question him. The
231 following section presents respondents' ratings regarding variables of culture and HRM in private organisations.

232 f) Respondents' ratings on cultural and HRM variables During in-depth interviews respondents were also
233 asked to express their current feelings and experiences by rating on cultural factors and HRM variables in
234 their respective organisations. Sixty per cent of the respondents in the private (local) sector organisations
235 identified their organisation's HRM policies and practices as collectivist-oriented with remainder claiming to
236 be individualistic-oriented. 60 per cent of those working in Private sector organisations also believed their
237 organisations structure is hierarchical. In addition, 60 per cent perceive that their leaders are trustworthy with
238 the same percentage believing that there is a high power distance. Almost 60 that their organisations recruitment,
239 selection, promotions and reward practices were nepotistic, sifarish or connection-based. Respondents were also
240 asked to rate whether training and development is viewed as an investment or as expenditure. 50 per cent
241 agreed that training and development had been treated as expenditure but management perception is changing
242 to consider its importance as an investment. Performance appraisal and promotions appear to be stronger in the
243 private (local) sector organisations. percent of the respondents confirmed that they believed V.

244 11 Conclusions

245 Examining cultural impact on HRM practices in private sector organisations is complex and multidimensional
246 especially in postcolonial societies such as Pakistan. Therefore, this demands more April accurate information and
247 interpretation. As a result, this study comprehensively reviewed the extant literature which inspired to conduct
248 in-depth interviews to answer central research questions. Results from this study identified cultural factors that
249 influence HRM practices of private sector organisations in Pakistan. Collectivism, high power distance, sifarish,
250 sycophancy and cronyism appear to have strong influences on HRM practices in private sector organisations.
251 This study found that Pakistani managers have a higher tendency to be high on collectivism and power distance.
252 Organisations are hierarchically structured, authority is unchallengeable and managers have a distrusting nature.

253 Broadly speaking, this study also found managerial support for sifarish or connection-based recruitment,
254 selection and promotion practices. Training and development practices are given little importance and
255 performance appraisal is not linked with promotions. Moreover, there is missing link between performance
256 appraisal and training of employees across all organisations under this investigation. These findings have
257 important implications for government policymakers and private organisational heads in Pakistan. Senior
258 executives and human resource managers across the board are recommended to establish meritbased recruitment
259 and selection and focus on employees training and development. There is urgent need for HR managers to establish
260 strong systems of performance appraisal systems linked with promotions and training of employees. This is likely
261 to reduce employee turnover on the hand and will enhance employees' satisfaction with and commitment to
262 their organisations. Policy makers in government and private sector organisations could use knowledge from
263 this survey as an input for adopting HRM in organisations. Although this research endeavours to add significant
264 contributions to the knowledge of cultural influence on HRM practices, there are limitations to this research. One
265 of the main limitations of the study is the modest sample size of respondents. This limitation does not minimize
266 the significance of the results or findings in this study. This is pointed out in order to direct the attention of future
267 research identifying and aiding further improvement in this area. More attention may be paid to focus on multi-
268 industry cross-sectional research with larger sample sizes across management and nonmanagement populations
269 of private sector organisations. It would be interesting to examine whether the findings could be replicated or
270 made applicable to other sectors of business such as government and multinational organisations.



1

Figure 1: Figure 1 :

former military regime earned lot of attention from US Advanced western economies consider HRM as strategic and affording competitive advantage, whereas, developing and agrarian nations are more likely to view HRM as an agency for fulfilling routine administrative activities, particularly in Pakistan's government and private sector organisations (Khilji, 2003, Khilji & Wang 2006; Jamil, 2005; Storey, 1995; Bjorkman, 2004). Moreover, recent literature supports the view that cultural factors are more important in the success of HRM in developing countries (Budhwar & Debrah, 2001, 2009; Khilji 2003; Khilji & Wang 2007). For example, Myloni et al. (2004) reported that HRM practices in Greece reflect elements of national culture to a great extent. Namazie & Tayeb (2006) also believe that both national factors and organisational strategies influence HRM practices. Shipton (2007) found that national culture has influenced HRM practices. Human Capital Pool

Human
Resource
Behaviour

function has changed from being reactive and administrative, to being proactive, executive in Western and developed economies. Nevertheless, this change in the HRM

[Note: HRM practices in Oman, and Mellahi (2007) identified that political, environment and legal frameworks affect HRM systems in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Sparrow & Wu (1997) found that cultural variables influence HRM policies and practices in Taiwan.]

Figure 2:

2012

Author(s)

Aycan 2000 Questionnaire
et
al.

Method

Findings/comment

Authors found paternalism, high power distance and collectivism

Khilji 2002 Interviews

to be major factors impacting on HRM functioning in Pakistan. Elements of national culture such as dependence, limited autonomy, dominance of social circles, and the colonial civil-military and landed

elite culture tend to exert influences on HRM systems.

Khilji 2003 Interviews

Parent companies influence HRM functioning of subsidiary MNCs in Pakistan, however, local culture also plays important role in the policies and

practices of HRM.

Khilji 2004 Interviews

Following a decade of deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation in

+ Pakistan and increasing competitiveness of firms enhanced the

Ques- need for modern

tion-

naire

HRM systems. However, national cultural values systems still remain deep-rooted

in management practices.

Islam 2004 Secondary data Pakistani society has relatively high collectivist orientation; a high propensity towards uncertainty avoidance, high power distance and masculinity

largely account for many traditions and practices including strict adherence to hierarchy, centralization, corruption, nepotism and gender differentiation in administrative roles.

Khilji 2006 Interviews

and Authors found that many organisations imitate HRM in the hopes

and

Wang

+ of improving organisational performance but this did not work.

Ques- HRM departments

tion-

naire

and managers are required to be trained and committed and supportive to develop

HRM systems by focusing upon actual 'implementation' within their organisations.

Implemented HRM is substantially different from intended HRM. Authors reveal HRM satisfaction is negatively related to turnover.

Khilji 2007 Questionnaire

Employee age and organisational performance are also found to moderate this

relationship significantly.

and

Wang

Bashir and Khattak 2008 Question The authors found that performance of public sector employees is affected by compensation and promotion practices. However

performance evaluation practices have an insignificant impact on perceived employee performance.

Bukha 2008

Findings suggest that altruism, conscientiousness and civic virtue

have positive relationship with organisational citizenship behav

11 CONCLUSIONS

2

Origin	No. of comp.	No. of interviews	Core informant's position in organisation		
			Top level	Middle level	Supervisory level
			management	management	management
Oil Industry	2	6	1	2	3
Banking & Finance	3	7	2	3	2
IT and	2	6	1	2	3
Communication					
Manufacturing	2	5	0	2	3
N N=	9 9	2 24	4 4	9 9	1 11

Figure 4: Table 2 :

3

V Variables

S Sub-v variables

Figure 6: Table 3 :

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