

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.

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

1 Introduction

he 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 peoplemanagement 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

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

2 II.

3 Literature Review

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

4 a) Competitive advantage

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

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

5 b) Relevance of HRM-cultural research with Pakistan

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

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

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

6 IV. Data Analysis a) Demographic information

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

7 b) Major findings

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

8 c) HRM functioning in a cultural perspective

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

One newly recruited manager gave similar expressions and said:

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

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

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

9 d) Employee involvement and participation

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

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

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

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

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

He current empirical evidence supports the proposition that 'sifarish culture, (connections and contacts) plays a significant role in recruitment, selection, promotion, appraisal, reward and benefits practices in private sector like government organisations. Moreover, the empirical evidence also suggests that the 'Seth' i.e. proprietor or owner of the company enjoys unquestionable authority and no one could dare to argue or question him. The following section presents respondents' ratings regarding variables of culture and HRM in private organisations. f) Respondents' ratings on cultural and HRM variables During in-depth interviews respondents were also asked to express their current feelings and experiences by rating on cultural factors and HRM variables in their respective organisations. Sixty per cent of the respondents in the private (local) sector organisations identified their organisation's HRM policies and practices as collectivist-oriented with remainder claiming to be individualistic-oriented. 60 per cent of those working in Private sector organisations also believed their organisations structure is hierarchical. In addition, 60 per cent perceive that their leaders are trustworthy with the same percentage believing that there is a high power distance. Almost 60 that their organisations recruitment, selection, promotions and reward practices were nepotistic, sifarish or connection-based. Respondents were also asked to rate whether training and development is viewed as an investment or as expenditure. 50 per cent agreed that training and development had been treated as expenditure but management perception is changing to consider its importance as an investment. Performance appraisal and promotions appear to be stronger in the private (local) sector organisations. percent of the respondents confirmed that they believed V.

11 Conclusions

Examining cultural impact on HRM practices in private sector organisations is complex and multidimensional especially in postcolonial societies such as Pakistan. Therefore, this demands more April accurate information and interpretation. As a result, this study comprehensively reviewed the extant literature which inspired to conduct in-depth interviews to answer central research questions. Results from this study identified cultural factors that influence HRM practices of private sector organisations in Pakistan. Collectivism, high power distance, sifarish, sycophancy and cronyism appear to have strong influences on HRM practices in private sector organisations. This study found that Pakistani managers have a higher tendency to be high on collectivism and power distance. Organisations are hierarchically structured, authority is unchallengeable and managers have a distrusting nature. Broadly speaking, this study also found managerial support for sifarish or connection-based recruitment, selection and promotion practices. Training and development practices are given little importance and performance appraisal is not linked with promotions. Moreover, there is missing link between performance appraisal and training of employees across all organisations under this investigation. These findings have important implications for government policymakers and private organisational heads in Pakistan. Senior executives and human resource managers across the board are recommended to establish meritbased recruitment and selection and focus on employees training and development. There is urgent need for HR managers to establish strong systems of performance appraisal systems linked with promotions and training of employees. This is likely to reduce employee turnover on the hand and will enhance employees' satisfaction with and commitment to their organisations. Policy makers in government and private sector organisations could use knowledge from this survey as an input for adopting HRM in organisations. Although this research endeavours to add significant contributions to the knowledge of cultural influence on HRM practices, there are limitations to this research. One of the main limitations of the study is the modest sample size of respondents. This limitation does not minimize the significance of the results or findings in this study. This is pointed out in order to direct the attention of future research identifying and aiding further improvement in this area. More attention may be paid to focus on multi-industry cross-sectional research with larger sample sizes across management and nonmanagement populations of private sector organisations. It would be interesting to examine whether the findings could be replicated or 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 influ
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 eco
Nevertheless, this change in the HRM f

[Note: HRM practices in Oman, andMellahi (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:

Year	Author(s)	Method	Findings/comment
2012	Aykan et al.	2000 Questionnaire	Authors found paternalism, high power distance and collectivism to be major factors impacting on HRM functioning in Pakistan.
	Khilji	2002 Interviews	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 + Questionnaire	Following a decade of deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation in Pakistan and increasing competitiveness of firms enhanced the need for modern 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 and Wang	2006 Interviews and Questionnaire	Authors found that many organisations imitate HRM in the hopes of improving organisational performance but this did not work. HRM departments and managers are required to be trained and committed and supportive to develop HRM systems by focusing upon actual 'implementation' within their organisations.
	Khilji and Wang	2007 Questionnaire and Questionnaire	Implemented HRM is substantially different from intended HRM. Authors reveal HRM satisfaction is negatively related to turnover. Employee age and organisational performance are also found to moderate this relationship significantly.
	Bashir and Khattak	2008 Questionnaire	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 Questionnaire	Findings suggest that altruism, conscientiousness and civic virtue have a positive relationship with organisational commitment.

2

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

Figure 4: Table 2 :

Figure 5:

3

V Variables	S Sub-v variables
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Figure 6: Table 3 :

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11 CONCLUSIONS

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