



## **Expatriate View: Organizational Factors Facilitating Human Resource Competitive Advantage in Saudi Arabia**

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### **Abstract**

Organizations in Saudi Arabia plan to boost Saudiazation policy with much intensity, by encouraging Saudi nationals replacing expatriates. Saudi Ministry of Labor took the decision in June 2011 to reduce unemployment among native Saudis. Expatriates were working on low salaries and with less expectation from top/senior managers. However after replacement of expat with native, organizations in Saudi Arabia will need to accommodate Saudi workers with their expectations and with that they need to justify that application of national policy brings productivity at organization level. This paper explores expatriates view about the factors needed for competitive advantage in Saudi organization. Five key points are deduced, after conducting informal questioning session with 40 expat professionals and reviewing existing literature. The suggestions presented in this paper suggested that, in order to affect Saudi employee behaviour positively, the Saudi firms must align HR internal practices consistently.

**Keywords:** Saudiazation, Employment, HR Competitive, Expatriates

**JEL Classification:** M53, J89, J61

**Paper Classification:** Research Paper

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### **Introduction**

Employees are considered as the most important differentiation resource of organization, as they have capacity to develop internal strategies as well as they are responsible for bringing productive result. Literature agrees to the fact that effective Human resource policy, procedure, and activity can influence and shape the skill and behavior of individual people to do their job the best for achieving desired organizational goals (Barney & Clark, 2007; Chen & Huang, 2009; Boxall et al., 2007; Delery & Doty, 1996). If employees are satisfied it will increase productivity which differentiates from their competitor thus it lead to competitive advantage (Purcell, 1999; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Li et al., 2006; Wall & Wood, 2005; Barney & Clark, 2007). However in the existing literature, there is lack of consensus on best Human Resource Management practices and tested empirical researches (Clinton & Guest, 2013). Although researchers have taken number of different best-practice approaches for examining Human resource issues, which may be more effective than another, however the evidence believe that best HR practices must be integrated well in overall system (Uhl-Bien et al., 2000).

With that, in literature there is relatively small number of researches from Saudi Human Resource Management context. Rapid development in the Saudi economy and constant changes in Saudi labour law (Saudiazation national policy, Saudi Vision 2030 in 2017, implementing taxes on expatriate dependents), all reinforce on same message- creating job opportunities to nationals, have exerted great pressure on organizations in Saudi Arabia to cope with changes and adopt competitive advantages to survive and continue to achieve the optimal result.

Saudiazation initiatives has been done in stages, first phase started from 2005, ministry make sure that it is a must for all employers to hire a percentage of Saudi national. Second stage initiated in 2011, *Nitaqat* (“ranges” or “zones”) term introduced which is a part of Saudiazation program introduced by the Saudi Ministry of Labour. The *Nitaqat* system imposes stricter penalties on Saudi companies as well. This categorized companies into four categories based on the degree to which their workforce consisted of Saudi nationals:

- **Platinum:** at least 40% Saudi nationals
- **Green:** at least 10% Saudi nationals
- **Yellow:** less than 10% Saudi nationals
- **Red:** no Saudi nationals

The third phase of Saudiazation started in 2016, where any company which is in red zone will face severe consequences such as expatriate employee work permit would not be renewed. However many private sector Saudi companies indicated their inability to recruit or hire Saudi nationals for technical, construction and engineer based jobs. And third phase was delayed due to inability to meet the required number of Saudi nationals. Expats were concerned with this policy initially that sooner or later they will be replaced with Saudi nationals, but they realized that substitution is not possible in a short period of time.

In such uncertainty, a question which concerns every expat is that how it will be possible for companies in Saudi to find their replacement and if it is possible for them, what factors organization should focus to sustain in market. This research is an attempt to explore key organizational factors which can facilitate competitive advantage from expatriate perspective. To investigate further, this research interviewed total forty expatriates, among them twenty were Male (20) and twenty Female (20) working in Universities (9), Furniture Showroom (8), Advertising Agency(7), Engineers (6), Salesperson (5) Hospital Administrators (5). They were all located in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The informal meeting was conducted face to face and only one main open ended question was asked since they were working so they knew the insight and missing links “**What are the missing HR and Organizational factors which can affect competitive advantage and implementation of nationalization policy**”. Asking respondents a single open ended question mainly helped researcher to identify five common issues.

- 1 - Haphazard Implementation of Saudi nationalization policy
- 2 - No Newness and Creative Inspiration at work
- 3 - Less Employee Empowerment and Limited Manager Capability
- 4 - Weak Professionalism and Disciplining Process
- 5 - Few Female Thrive at work

Five points indicated by expatriates are further elaborated below in order to understand the importance of those factors.

## Haphazard Implementation of Saudi Nationalization Policy

The implementation issues of Saudiazation policy at organization level without any plan created chaos according to the expats in Saudi. Elaborating further this point considering existing literature indicated that much discussion is found with 'what' strategic human resource management is, and lack of evidence available about 'how' to integrate business strategy and human resource management together (Truss & Gratton, 1994; Buller & Napier, 1993). To resolve "implementation" issues in perspective of Strategic innovation includes a broad set of activities that call for support and proactive involvement across the organization by the leaders and managers (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988). Therefore, for effective implementation, leaders may need to communicate internally to gain broader organizational support for any transition to one specific program or plan to another, any specific change in organization hierarchy or brand development. However, potential barrier can happen if too much of concentration is placed at one stage, phase or level of hierarchy, or lack of understanding is there regarding integration across different levels of implementing change (Bouwen et al., 1992). In order to stay competitive and reach business goals, there is a consensus in the HRM field that high level well informed and capable HR managers/leaders must incorporate HRM strategies into their overall planning.

Linking the above information in context to Saudi Arabia, where large numbers of expatriates were working on senior/junior post, will be vacant due to the government Saudiazation policy and tax enforcement on expatriates. In such case, if not planned carefully in advance then implementation will be difficult and gaps will become wider between policy and on ground issues. The actual reason for delaying Saudi national policy is because there is less number of trained and qualified Saudis available. In such scenario, talent and abilities of the existing staff need to be evaluated, training need to be identified for selected Saudi workers, and search plan may be initiated to fill skill vacuum that cannot be met by the current labor force. Furthermore, Saudi companies require succession planning for grooming, training and guiding, the next generation of Saudi organizational managers and leaders. At present, these efforts are not centralized or coordinated. If the above practices are not applied appropriately then "quick fix" solution will be found to fill a particularly critical vacuum, where the outcome will be affected. In regard to that literature also asserts strongly that organization require balance guiding principles that encourage the inflow and outflow of talent to have minimal internal disrupt (Dyer & Hricksen, 2005). Only learning organization can initiate and adjust to changes in their environment by which they can gain competitive advantage (Weldy & Gilles, 2010). Learning cannot be forced at institution level; it needs to be adopted with willingness and openness. Thus this research believes strongly that to achieve competitive edge, companies in Saudi Arabia need to develop HR mechanism to fix Saudiazation implementation issues through learning organically instead of forced approach.

**Proposition 1:** *Saudi organizations need to identify the HR issues during implementation of Saudi Nationalization Policy and explore better solutions to resolve for effective outcome.*

## No Newness and Creative Inspiration

Second factor which expat felt missing and needed attention is low acceptance for creativity at Saudi workplace. To improve and to move forward, organizations need to be constantly in a state of either incremental transformation or continuous improvement. Similarly, "Saudi HR incremental transformations" is required to restructure, redesign and repair to work strategically and deliver better results for fulfilling requirement of nationalization policy. Companies that embark on copy paste one-shot HR radical transformation quickly come to disappointment and

later regret it. So, rather than trying to make a drastic change, HR leaders can create a system that can continuously adapt to the workforce, workplace and business. Changing HR process require substantial amount of effort and time with upgrading system, creating new roles, new teams, new reporting structures and reform. Companies that take a continuous-improvement approach under inspirational leadership are highly attuned to the current need and they tend to suffer less short-term discomfort and realize greater long-term benefits. Existing literature in Saudi work context also concluded that there is a need for combination of right policies and good human capital to improve 'creative outcomes' (Iqbal, 2011). To increase the element of creativity and further innovation, this research support the fact that to enable company growth, efficiency, leadership understanding for transitions, and worker productivity, organizations must promote Research and Development (R&D) (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). R&D is not only to develop new products and services but also assists in improving the system, technology and work process, creating more values through innovation and knowledge generation (Alves et al., 2007).

During the interview it is observed that expatriates working in Saudi Arabia indicated a concern that Saudi organizations have monotone work approach, consequently there is a need to break that dark image and there is a need to appreciate new ways: newness with leadership style, newness at workplace interiors/office design, newness in adopting technology, newness in providing service or newness in hiring. If an organization can convey that it is a great place to work for, it can attract the right people (Greer, 2005). To attract creative people for the job vacancies, some organisations communicate their priority and expectation about candidate innovative capacity in their job advertisements. For example, a leading company in Sri Lanka had stated in its job advertisement for Head of Finance position as "*freedom to innovate, opportunity to prosper*" in bold and red color capital letters, under the candidate behavioural traits, had stated that the candidate should display, "*Drive to convert new ideas into a successful innovation*" (Sunday Observer, 11 May 2014). Such are the good examples and practices to show the extent to which some organisations are very keen to provide priority to attract creative and innovative people to their organisations. Newness and creativity is not a task of one person or group in organization, it is possible if energy is same from top to bottom.

Along with that, getting acknowledged by an external source is a good way to create a recognized brand locally and internationally. Inclusion on the list of "Best innovative Companies to work for in Saudi Arabia, or "Ten Best Companies for Saudi Working Mothers" will add value for concerned parties.

**Proposition 2:** *Saudi organizations need to bring continuous improvement, creative inspiration and fresh innovative aspect in HRM activities to have productive outcome .*

## **Less Employee Empowerment and Limited Manager Capability**

Third most common issue according to expatriates is limited manager capability and less of chance for employee to do office task according to capability. According to Grant (1991), a capability is to perform some task to the best of employee ability for competitive advantage. To increase manager or employee capability, employees themselves may also actively "craft" their jobs by choosing tasks, negotiating different job content, and by assigning meaning to their task or job (Parker & Ohly, 2008). The research evidence support the positive claim and self-rating for job crafting for work engagement, employability and performance (Tims et al., 2011). Such self-initiated work behaviours such as voicing, job crafting and proactive performance will be most prevalent among employees who are high in energy, involved in their work, and who strive to make their organization successful (Tims et al., 2011). Morrison (2014) defined employee voice

as the unrestricted, informal, and flexible communication of ideas, suggestions, justifications, feedback, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to a person who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change. Hakanen et al. (2008) believe such voicing behaviour would lead to engagement, enhance job retention as well as facilitate the creation of environment where information can flow effectively within and between groups (Collins & Smith, 2006). After layoff, survivors need to be valued, it may ease their concerns by increasing the frequency of team meetings, providing safe atmosphere, fair performance evaluation and providing training/development that will be useful in future (Zatzick & Iverson, 2006).

This research strongly asserts that due to much job insecurities and regulation changes, at the same time requirement to fulfil Saudi labour policy, Saudi Organizations can use effective employee management techniques focusing on values and processes to find new ways of engaging employees such as emotional quality management, stress management, spiritual leadership, lean leadership etc at different levels of the organization. These practices can enhance survivors' productivity and it can bring quality at work, high employee satisfaction and more collaboration. Such practice can benefit in voicing and reaching out employee concerns which can enable an organization to achieve a competitive advantage. Thus more case study, field survey, and Saudi and expat employee view needed on this specific area. Realizing the shortage of literature, this study highlight the importance of identifying more about empowerment strategies in Saudi context, how such practices must consider the critical role that HR policy play in the development of employee capability.

**Proposition 3:** *Empowerment of Saudi employees and managers to engage can lead to employee productivity.*

## Weak Professionalism and Disciplining Process

According to expat in Saudi Arabia, weak professionalism and disciplining process can effect competitive advantage. Being '*competent*' and being '*professional*' are not the same. '*Competent*' means having sufficient skill, knowledge, experience, for a job whereas '*professionalism*' is a sense of higher purpose, meeting quality work standard, honesty, and integrity. Therefore professional workers like to take responsibility for their own behavior and work effectively with others. However, unprofessional attitude can bring pessimist and negative feeling at work later they vent out their dissatisfaction on other co-workers. Such personalities are unwilling to take responsibility but if they take any then in case of issues or problem arises, corporate bullies, start publicizing subordinate mistakes in inappropriate and embarrassing ways. These toxic workers spend time on gossiping and forming groups that promote an "us versus them" environment. Another huge distractive behaviour for productive employees is the attitude of Clock watchers-waiting to working hour to just finish or finding other ways to occupy company time without being productive such as emailing friends, loud phone calls, surfing the web, updating facebook status, coming late to office time, such work practices are considered as '*corruption*' (Arab News, 2014). However, because of social factor, coming late to work is a problem for workers in Saudi Arabia, as people use to be awake late in the night (Saudi Gazette, 2017). Realizing this issue, Saudi ministry proposed in 2016 to close shops at 9 p.m to reorganize the job market, cut unemployment rate, creating a suitable working atmosphere for Saudi men/women and encouraging them to work in the retail sector, which is currently dominated by expatriate workers. How practical is this solution, still there is debate on this topic.

Another common professionalism related issue at Saudi work place is submitting false medical leaves, which is also realized by the companies but no ways are defined to tackle it. On

a religious aspect, Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz Alsheikh has issued a fatwa declaring the issuing and receiving of fraudulent medical sick leave certificates as sinful behaviour (Arab News, 2016, Feb). However at organizational level 'Transparency' is required to combat such practice. Otherwise 'Unproductive Saudiazation' will remain the cause of organization's below average outcome. It is a HR key job to open the dialogue with such difficult employees and discuss problems without causing defensive reaction. Specific strategies can be designed for mentoring and counselling to redirect unacceptable behavior and resolve problems.

Organizations that excel at managing talent and employees well will continue to enjoy a competitive advantage (Lawler, 2008). Thus it requires individual's serious work approach, team work and professionalism, such as the example of Apple and Google, they hire, reward and recognize employees for a common desire, energy and enthusiasm to create great products and to retain a culture of innovation through their HR practices. Google ensures their culture of innovation remains strong by giving their engineers time to invent. And employees' performance reviews consider how they spent their time. Because the innovation process is often lengthy, uncertain, and multidisciplinary, firms should signal the importance and value of innovation as a corporate priority, and provide formal appraisal mechanism to measure innovation behavior, activities and favourable outputs (Brockbank, 1999). For employees, positive performance appraisal creates feeling of achievement and serves as a critical motivator (Jaw & Liu, 2003; Jiménez-Jiménez & Sanz-Valle, 2011). On the contrary, if guided well will make disappointed performance review employee more attentive and cautious at workplace.

**Proposition 4:** *Bringing professionalism and positive attitude at work by individual Saudi employee can change the spirit of organization.*

### Few Female Thrive at Work

Saudi women are now entering many organization positions, but they need encouragement and support in order to retain their place in the labor market. Saudi women make up only 10.1% of the work force (Arab News, 2016 Sep).

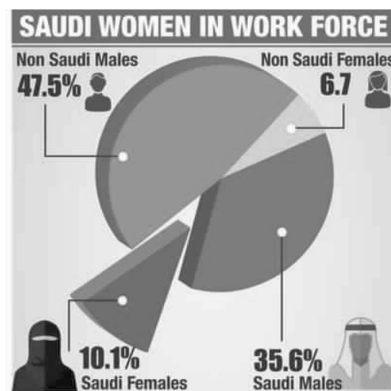


Fig 1- Arab News (Sep, 2016)

Recent announcement has been made that from 21 April 2017, all jobs in shopping malls will be for Saudis. It means more jobs for Saudi females at retail side: cashiers, customer service representatives and supervisors, although they have been serving customers and dealing with cash till date and before as well, but there is severe unsatisfactory attitude from customer due to missing elements in customer service (Arab News, 2014). Such negative attitudes need to be

fixed by organization to improve their customer service and organization performance. Media indicated concern for Saudi females' retail worker dress by customers. Customers find it hard to differentiate between female retail workers and other customers as they all look same due to black Abaya with face cover (niqab) (Arab News, 2014). Organizations in Saudi should at least have some jackets, or ribbons or name tags so that customers can spot them easily. Employee will also feel loyal in associating and representing brand to customer.

With that, customers have also indicated that female sale representative's communication skill lacks confidence about product information and English language. Thus customer service is cold and basic (Arab News, 2014).

From employee side, Saudi retail side has failed to provide rest rooms which lead many female employees sit in other areas (prayer rooms and food court) of the mall between shifts (Arab News, 2013). Furthermore, inspection can be conducted to make sure health, safety and physical work environment conditions are met for female workers (Parveen, 2014). Poor awareness on the definition and nature of the harassment at work in Saudi Arabia (Arab News, 2015); organization need to be serious in hearing such cases and resolve sale women reservation regarding harassment.

Till now the most pressing issues are transportation, absence of nurseries, lack of training and low wages causing high turnover rate (Arab News, 2016, May).

Hiring employees without possessing required skill or educational level; hiring based on family name or personal connections, which are known as source (*Wasta*) (Rawaf, 1990).

After entering in the labor market, some Saudi females are apparently not interested in developing themselves and refuse to take part in training sessions, and this may deter an organization from recruiting females since some females are giving a negative image of Saudi female employees (Sidiya & AlJassem, 2010).

Saudi female workers achievement is not highlighted or appreciated much, it is suggested that Saudi female contribution and leadership achievement should be publicized by each organization so that it can enhance the motivation of worker and credibility of organization as well.

The above concern shows that, within Saudi context, it is essential to determine which specific programs or policy are speeding or slowing the progression of Saudi female participation in organization.

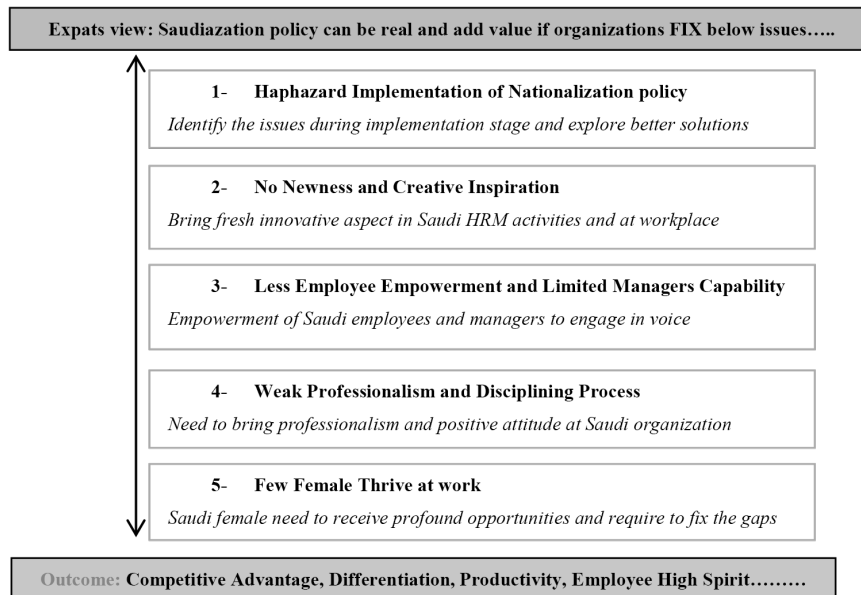
**Proposition 5:** *If Saudi female receive profound opportunities and manages to fix workplace gaps, Saudi organizations can lead and can have greater competitive advantage.*

## Conclusion

It is expected that Saudiazation program needs to be accelerated after the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, which requires much serious motivated and creative Saudi individuals who can bring innovation, professionalism as well are better substitutes to expatriates. Expatriates in Saudi Arabia were working with much pressure, minimum expectation and low wage. Moving towards future without expatriate workers is possible but in that case Saudis need to arm themselves well to take lead. Preparation with focus is required for that. Most of the existing literature discusses the Saudiazation implementation challenges in general, but there is no research so far from expatriate perspective about missing organizational factors which can effect competitive advantage. Since expat work more number of years in Saudi organizations, their insights can

have rationality and reasonableness. Therefore, this paper explores expatriates view about the factors needed for competitive advantage in Saudi organization (Fig 2). According to expat, implementation loopholes at organizational level need to be identified and consideration for better solution is required for effective outcome of Saudi labour national policy. Saudi Organizational leaders and high performance managers should check the practical possibilities and improve and enrich the function of HR department and other key departments to receive positive outlook. Embracing newness and creative approach is a part and parcel of every business; customers and employees both will be bored and disengaged with product or service if company is not willing to experiment and add differentiating factor. Thus, Saudi organizations need to bring fresh innovative aspect on a constant level to have more productive outcome. Valuing employees as human capital is also suggested by expatriates because it is an important source of competitive advantage. They should invest in talented Saudi employees, making them professional masters and empower them more. To maintain professionalism and discipline, they should transparently measure and monitor the performance of workers regularly; corrupt and toxic workers should be counselled and dealt accordingly. Bringing professionalism and positive attitude at work by individual Saudi employee can change the spirit of organization. Along with creating more suitable job opportunities for Saudi female, organizations can create better work environment by hearing their concerns and celebrating their winning project. There is no specific one secret formula for seizing competitive advantage however by incorporating above mentioned factors companies in Saudi Arabia can fulfil Saudiazation policy at its best.

Number of researchers have investigated and placed greater importance on the alignment of Human resource practices (attract, motivate, retain employees) with firm business strategies (Boxall et al., 2007; Schuler & Jackson, 1987; Tan & Azzat, 2011), and they viewed this process as a vital element in attaining competitive advantage (Buller & Napier, 1993). However this research noticed that there is a lack of researches from Saudi context. Therefore there is a need to conduct more researches in future to identify main key organizational factors assisting Saudi companies in implementing Saudiazation policy effectively.



**Fig 2. Organizational Factors needed in Saudi Arabia for effective HR outcome**

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