Managing Workforce Diversity at Gulf Cooperation Council Construction Sites

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Abstract

Construction projects at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries consist of a diverse and multi-cultural workforce. Successful management of construction projects requires effective communication among this diverse workforce. It is estimated that non-national employees constitute more than 50% of the workforce in some GCC countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Thus, it is important to understand the nature and influence of cultural diversity at GCC construction sites. This paper investigates previous studies to identify potential active cultural differences in GCC countries as well as their influence in avoiding undesirable outcomes. The investigation revealed three active cultural differences: high power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. Based on the results of this study, practical recommendations that can be used as a guide for managing active cultural differences at GCC construction sites have been suggested and is presented in this paper.

Keywords

Active Cultural Difference, Construction Management, Construction Safety, National Culture

Introduction

Construction projects in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC) have a diverse workforce, with manpower from a wide-range of countries such as India, USA, Pakistan, UK, and Thailand (Kapiszewski 2006). Multi-cultural construction sites should be efficiently managed to avoid miscommunications due to supervisors' lack of knowledge regarding cultural differences (Al-Bayati 2016a-b; Loosemore 1999). Miscommunication, between supervisors' and the diverse workforce influences construction outcomes in terms of safety, quality, and time of completion (Casey 2015; Mitropoulos 2012; Kath 2010). A major consequence of miscommunication is unsafe behavior which accounts for more than 80% of the work-related

accidents (Choudhry 2014; Abudayyeh 2006). Thus, it is important to understand the nature of cultural differences at GCC construction sites.

Even though an understanding of cultural differences at construction sites is important for the efficient management of projects, there have been relatively very few studies in this area. One of the primary reasons for fewer cultural diversity studies at construction sites is the wide-ranged definition of the word "*culture*." Recently, Al-Bayati (2016b) suggested using the term "*active cultural difference"* for referring to cultural differences that may affect construction site communication and for narrowing the definition of the word "*culture*." This is because not all cultural differences influence communication. Therefore, the communication channels between construction crews and site supervisors, require special attention to improving construction site safety and productivity.

Hofstede Theory

The social environment typically forms an individual's cultural values and perspectives and can be used for predicting responses to different situations when the nationality of the person is known (Hofstede 2010). This paper proposes a model for investigating the cultural differences of workforces at GCC construction sites that is based on Hofstede's cultural framework (Al-Bayati 2016a-b). Several studies have used Hofstede's framework to assess cultural differences in a diverse construction workforce (Al-Bayati 2016a; Loosemore 1999; Ling 2003). In addition, Hofstede's framework has been established as a benchmark for comparing cultural values based on an individual's nationality (Soares 2007). Hofstede's framework encompasses six cultural dimensions that represent the differences in values among individuals, based on their country of origin (Al-Bayati 2016b; Hofstede 2010).

To utilize Hofstede's theory, the comparison must be based on the nationality of the workforce. Thus, in this study, three nationalities have been selected: United States of America (USA) representing western values, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) representing Middle Eastern values, and India representing Asian values. Figure 1 shows the cultural indices of the three nationalities based on a 1-120 scale, where a higher number indicates a stronger existence of the value (Hofstede 2010). The following is a brief description of Hofstede's cultural values:

- **High Power Distance:** This is defined as a cultural value that indicates the degree of construction workers' dependency on supervisors. It is seen that workers with low power distance show limited dependence on their supervisors while easily approaching their supervisors for discussions.
- **Individualism/Collectivism**: This is defined as a cultural value that indicates the importance of personal relationships within a working community. Individualism refers to a loose work-relationship where every individual, within a working group, is involved in their own job and work relations are easily broken after the completion of a project
- **Masculinity/Femininity**: This is defined as a cultural value that identifies the type of life a working individual prefers. A masculine individual would like to be recognized for his/her good work and advance to a higher-level job, with an opportunity for a higher salary
- **Uncertainty Avoidance**: This is defined as a cultural value that refers to an individual's preferences with respect to rules and orders. Workers with an uncertainty avoidance culture prefer a regulated management style with systematic directions.

- **Long-Term Orientation**/Short-Term Orientation: This is defined as a cultural value that refers to an individual's attitude towards tradition while fulfilling social obligations. Workers with short-term orientation culture are more focused on traditions and social obligations.
- **Indulgence/Restraint**: This is defined as a cultural value that refers to an individual's attitude towards enjoining life and having fun. Workers with the indulgence culture focus more on the human desires of enjoying life and having fun, whereas restraint individuals focus much less on these aspects.

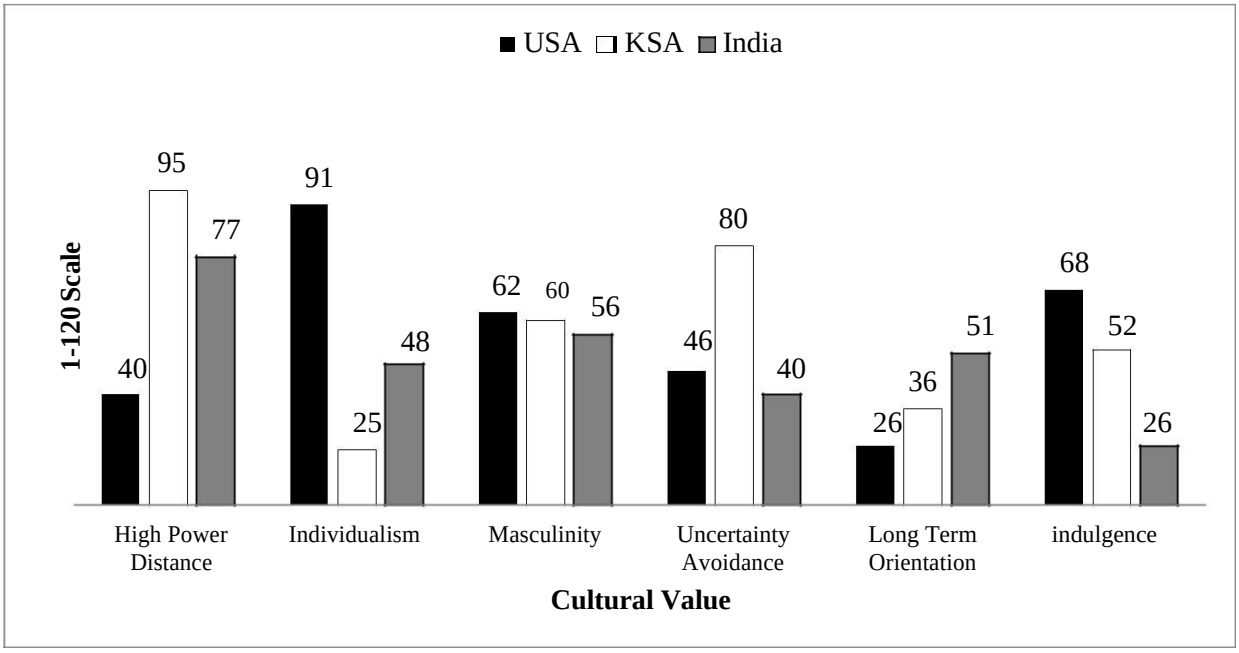

Fig. 1. Difference in Cultural Dimensions

Potential Active Cultural Differences at GCC Construction Sites

The goal of using the terminology "*active cultural difference*" is to focus on the cultural dimensions that primarily affect construction site safety. Thus, not all cultural dimensions have to be addressed. Rather, only dimensions that may affect the overall site safety must be investigated. The differentiation between the cultural dimensions is based on their potential impact on communication between workers and their supervisors. A careful examination of the six dimensions has resulted in eliminating long-term orientation and indulgence from the active cultural differences list since these dimensions have no potential impact on daily communications. Further, since there is no significant difference among the three nationalities in terms of masculinity, this dimension has also been removed. The remaining three dimensions (high power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance) seems to have an impact on communications and should be investigated as possible active cultural differences. The selection of the three dimensions is based on the following rationale:

- **High power Distance:** Construction workers with a high-power distance culture will not communicate their safety concerns and needs as well as a request for more information or clarification if the directions they receive are not clear. Furthermore, they will not report

any close-calls that they have been involved in. On the other hand, supervisors with high power distance may consider any discussion or concerns, regarding his orders, as a direct challenge to his authority.

- **Collectivism:** The main undesirable effect of the collectivism culture is a non-trusting environment among a group of workers. On the other hand, this cultural value among workers may enforce site safety if managed well since workers tend to take care of each other.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Workers with a high uncertainty avoidance culture will strive to get detailed instructions from their supervisors. Construction supervisors, on the other hand, may not provide detailed instructions to these workers. Thus, the workers may feel uncomfortable executing the task which may lead to an unsafe behavior.

Managing Active Cultural Differences at GCC Construction Sites

Effective management of active cultural differences is important for improving project outcomes. Two possible interactions at a construction site are discussed to help understand how active cultural differences impact construction sites. Consider a construction environment that has two site engineers: one from the USA and one from KSA in addition to workers from India. It is important to realize that it is the construction supervisors' responsibility to be aware of active cultural differences for proper management of the workers.

5 **Interaction One – USA Supervisor and Indian Workers**

A supervisor from the USA must be aware that Indian workers have a higher power distance value, which means that they will not freely express their needs and safety issues as the supervisor expects. Consequently, the USA supervisor must continually encourage the Indian workers to ask questions and communicate their needs openly. In addition, the supervisor from the USA should be aware of the collectivistic culture of Indian workers and should able to use this value for improving site communication. One technique that can be employed is to designate a safety person from among the India workers to train on safety procedures. In addition, providing this individual with the required authorization to promote and take corrective actions when needed would also increase the quality of communication. Successful implementation of this technique may improve the communication and trust factor between workers and their supervisor. Improving communication will reduce the probability of unsafe behavior due to task unclarity and will increase the productivity since it will reduce the need for work redo.

6 **Interaction Two – KSA Supervisor and Indian Workers**

In this case, the construction supervisor from KSA and the Indian workers both carry a high-power distance value. In this situation, there is a higher probability of having a wider communication gap since the workers will neither discuss nor question their supervisor's instructions while the supervisor will not encourage discussions. It should be the supervisor's responsibility to avoid such situations and initiate periodic meetings. The main goal of the meetings is for encouraging the workers to express their needs and concerns without fear. An open conversation will help reduce the distrust by generating a collectivism culture. It is also crucial to designate a safety person, from among the workers to improve communication. In addition, the higher uncertainty avoidance of the KSA supervisor may be disturbing for the Indian workers. In this case, the Indian workers will receive more details than they need on how to execute a task and may consider that undesirable since extensive details may limit their creativity. Thus, the KSA

supervisor should discuss the task execution plan with the Indian workers as well as utilize their valuable suggestions to ensure that they are feeling comfortable during execution.

Conclusion

GCC construction sites hire a diverse workforce from different nationalities to fill various positions within the construction industry. Managing cultural diversity among the workforce is crucial to the success of a construction project. The lack of knowledge regarding active cultural differences directly affects communication between construction workers and their supervisors. This could directly affect construction project outcomes such quality, safety, and time completion. It is difficult to suggest a single method that can manage active cultural differences; instead, each construction site should have site-specific plans that consider its unique aspects. Active cultural differences are based on Hofstede's theory and depend on the background and nationality of the individuals involved in the construction industry. It is strongly recommended that construction supervisors pay more attention to the values and culture of their workers to improve communications and the work environment.

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