

# Institutional and corporate drivers of global talent management: Evidence from the Arab Gulf region



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## ABSTRACT

This study analyses how talent management (TM) is molded by institutional and corporate drivers. We borrow from the vast institutional literature to understand how organizations adopt and implement TM practices within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context. This context is valuable not only because it tackles an under-researched region, but also because the type of variables found further our understanding of TM processes in non-Western contexts. Companies abide by localization rules to sustain their “legal” legitimacy, while trying to improve efficiency through actions that enhance their economic sustainability. Companies try to strike a strategic balance between local adaptation and global assimilation of their TM processes. We conclude by presenting a framework that portrays how various forces impact the TM process.

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## 1. Introduction

While business and management scholars have called for more international research into talent management (TM) (Hartmann, Feisel, & Schober, 2010), research in this field remains fragmented and under-developed, and the topic still lacks a clear definition (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Tarique & Schuler, 2010). We borrow from Collings and Mellahi (2009) the definition of talent management as “activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization” (p. 304). Most scholarly work has tended to ignore the role of contextual factors in shaping global TM practices (McDonnell, Lamare, Gunnigle, & Lavelle, 2010). Researchers refer to external forces or drivers, beyond corporate control, that impact the organizational ability to manage the global TM process. Tarique and Schuler (2010), for example, refer to globalized talent-migration tendencies, demographic changes, and demand–supply gaps, terming these as “exogenous drivers” of global TM challenges (p. 126). They also refer to the legal environment as being among those drivers although there is no extended work on the role of such forces in the global TM

process. Schuler, Jackson, and Tarique (2011) identify several barriers to global TM initiatives that include (1) time dedicated to TM by senior managers, (2) organizational structures, (3) lack of involvement by middle managers, (4) lack of willingness to acknowledge performance variances among employed workers, (5) lack of HR knowledge in how to properly address TM challenges, and (6) the discrepancy between knowledge and action that limits managerial ability to make the right TM decisions. Those barriers are important and overcoming them is key to any successful TM strategy. Yet, as TM expands as a theory and practice across countries and emerging markets, there emerge other exogenous barriers that still need to be acknowledged and organizational responses in coping with them identified. Prior research has suggested that institutional mechanisms can reduce the impact of HR practices (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). Along the same line, we argue in this paper, a failure to understand institutional structures found in specific contexts is likely to lead to a failure of TM recommended practices. This applies forcefully to MNCs who often face the dual, sometimes opposing, pressures of local adaptation on the one hand and global integration on the other (Kostova & Roth, 2002). We focus on the Arab Gulf region context in this study, a key emerging market which contributes to expanding the scope of understanding regarding the TM process at a global level.

## 2. The context of Arab Gulf countries

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) context includes major oil-producing countries: United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia (EIU, 2009). The GCC is valuable not just

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**Table 1**  
Local and foreign populations in GCC countries.

Country	Population <sup>a</sup>		Total <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of locals	Labor force <sup>a</sup>		Total <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of locals
	Locals	Foreigners			Locals	Foreigners		
Kuwait	1,133,214	2,433,223	3,566,437	32%	347,621	1,779,955	2,127,576	16%
Saudi Arabia	18,707,576	8,429,401	27,136,977	69%	3,837,968	4,310,024	8,147,992	47%
Bahrain	568,399	666,172	1,234,571	46%	139,347	457,694	597,041	23%
United Arab Emirates	947,997	7,316,073	8,264,070	11%	250,271	4,909,084	5,159,355	5%
Qatar	254,484	1,442,079	1,696,563	15%	71,076	1,199,107	1,270,183	6%
Oman	1,957,336	816,143	2,773,479	71%	274,027	740,241	1,014,268	27%
	23,569,006	21,103,091	44,672,097	53%	4,920,310	13,396,105	18,316,415	27%

<sup>a</sup> Source: Najjar (2013) with minor adjustments.

because we are examining an understudied geographic region, but because the extent and type of variables found there would help further our understanding of talent attraction, selection, development, and retention processes. The extreme heterogeneity of the workforce, the dynamics of managing pools of local versus foreign workers, and the distinctive regulatory environment vis-à-vis employment practices all represent factors that have not been duly addressed in prior TM research. Besides this, the region is notably very alluring to multinational companies due to its pool of natural resources, economic attractions, and developed infrastructures. This offers an opportunity to understand how companies are able to cope with such variables and use them to their advantage.

Established in 1981, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are historically, geographically, and culturally linked (GCC, 2013). They are all situated next to each other in the Arabian Peninsula, in Southwest Asia. They are Arab countries, sharing Islam as their dominant religion, and ruled by hereditary systems (monarchies, emirates, or sultanates) with a colonial historical background. They have – with some inter-country differences – vast natural resources of oil and gas. Before the discovery of oil, those countries were dispersed tribal societies that depended on agriculture and primitive marine industries, such as fishing and pearl farming. Since the discovery of oil in the early part of the twentieth century, the region's economies witnessed structural changes. A major drive into building up the infrastructure and the oil/gas industries necessitated the import of droves of foreign labor from neighboring countries, such as Egypt and other countries of the Middle East, and from distant countries in Southeast Asia. Table 1 lists some statistics (2010) regarding the populations of the GCC countries, including the percentage of locals in relation to the total population and in the labor force, showing that about three quarters of the working population is comprised of expatriates.

The economic prosperity that ensued from the discovery of oil drove local citizens employed in various industries to quit their former employment, and companies began to depend increasingly on foreign labor. Within a few decades, it became apparent that the local/foreigner ratio of workers reached unprecedented levels, posing a multitude of social and organizational problems. The expatriate number rose from about 9 million in 1990 to an estimated 21–24 million in 2013 (about 14 million are workers) or about 48% of the total population and 73% of the working population (Dito, 2008; Hyslop, 2012; Najjar, 2013). The numbers of expatriates reached phenomenal levels in the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait (sometimes over 90% of the working population), while the percentages are relatively lower in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman. This dependency on foreign workers leads to unemployment among the local populations. Unemployment, for example, in Saudi Arabia, is estimated to be over 30% among the young population and women (Shediak & Samman, 2010). There are seemingly discrepancies between the skills of the local populations and the demands of companies, making the latter more likely to

hire foreign labor and expatriate managers, leaving some of the local population without jobs.

The Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2009) projects that the GCC will grow even further as an economic and trading hub. The GDP of GCC countries is expected to hit US \$2 trillion in 2020. The GCC geographic location and trade links will continue to grow in importance. The region will remain a major importer of foreign talent by 2020, but competition for such talent will become even fiercer, especially in those sectors that have been witnessing a scarce supply of talent. Changes in the educational structure of the GCC will improve the domestic supply of specialized talent (Kapiszewski, 2006), but this is unlikely to have a major impact in meeting the growing demands, and dependency on expatriates is not expected to subside in the near future (Naithani & Jha, 2010). Despite huge investments made by national governments in the education sector, which include bringing outstanding universities and research projects to the region (EIU, 2009), the fruits of educational reforms are not expected to materialize in the short run. In sum, the region's growing importance will be coupled with a rising need for talent that cannot be met by local supply.

Sensing the negative trends in local/foreign labor ratios, the GCC countries responded in the 1980s and 1990s by implementing localization policies, with the aim of replacing foreign workers with local ones (Ebrasu & Al Ariss, 2012; Forstenlechner & Mellahi, 2011). Countries enforced varying localization (or nationalization) rates, which also varied from one sector to another. For example in 2011, nationalization rates in the private sector varied between 1% in Qatar to 20% in Bahrain (GulfTalent, 2009). At 59%, Saudi Arabia had the highest increase in nationalization during the same year, compared to 15% for Qatar. As a whole, the region still witnesses a very large foreign labor presence, which has not subsided even after localization policies were passed and compliance became monitored.

Inevitably, localization policies pose numerous problems for companies in the TM process. Companies cannot operate under the assumption that talent could be sourced from anywhere and placed anywhere without hurdles. The impact of nationalization policies on organizational abilities to attract, develop, and retain the right talent, both local and foreign, remains understudied.

### 3. Research framework and questions

As indicated earlier, the concept of TM has been laden with confusion and it is still in its early stages (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Scholars (e.g. Schuler et al., 2011), however, are in agreement that there is a growing recognition regarding the importance of TM for competitive advantage and that there is a global talent shortage (World Economic Forum, 2011). Schuler et al. (2011) propose a model for global talent challenges and global TM (Fig. 1, with minor adaptations for clarity purposes) where forces and shapers of global talent challenges are

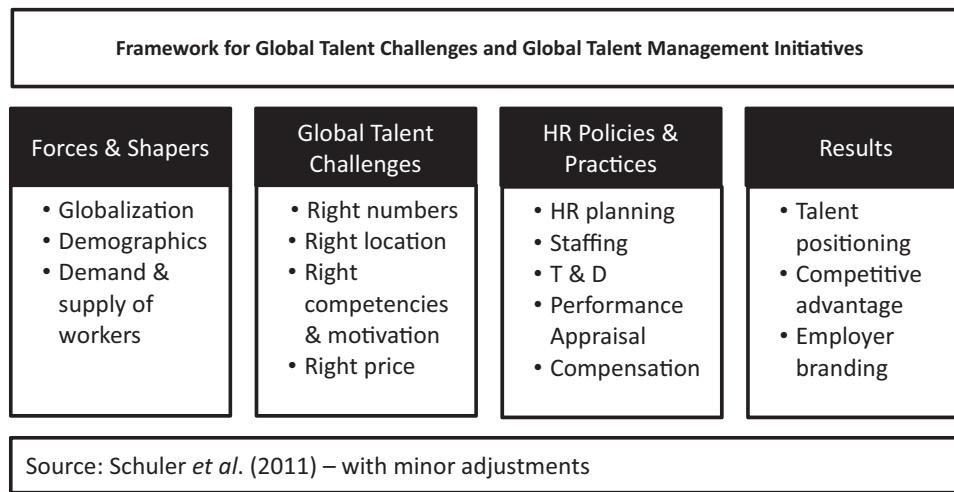


Fig. 1. Framework for Global Talent Challenges and Global Talent Management Initiatives.

identified. These include issues of a global nature, such as wage differentials, competition, customers, and markets, in addition to population trends and gaps in demand and supply for workers. The framework suggests that desirable outcomes ensue from HR practices (planning, staffing, training and development, performance appraisals, and compensation) that are able to cope with such forces and shapers. Such outcomes include better talent positioning and competitive advantage. This recommended path for MNCs – we suggest – is often not directly realized, for a variety of institutional factors. We present the example of the GCC to show how institutional and cultural drivers often pose new sets of challenges to the TM process.

We borrow from the vast institutional literature to understand how organizations adopt and implement TM practices, or how they sometimes fail to implement them. Organizations that share the same context tend to look more similar and adopt similar practices than those that do not. This is related to the concept of isomorphism discussed in institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations become amazingly similar and adopt similar practices because of three types of pressures: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive pressures usually emanate from the variance in power among different players. The best example, relevant to our study, is the role of government in imposing regulative pressures on companies. Mimetic pressures result from organizations imitating each other, either because an imitated organizational practice is perceived as successful, or because this seems to be the most rational course of action in uncertain organizational moments (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008; Haveman, 1993). In the case of TM, because many MNCs realize the importance of TM processes and see how many competing firms have fared well in that process, mimetic pressures push through the adoption of standard TM processes that have proven their success. Companies imitate each other hoping to reach desirable organizational outcomes. Normative pressures stem from the expectations held by relevant others that make a certain course of action more attractive, even offering a certain moral worthiness (Suchman, 1995). Such pressures include signs from the external environment that embracing a certain system or configuration is a correct moral choice (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008).

We suggest that in the specific context of GCC, companies are subject to these different types of pressures in the TM process as follows:

- (1) Coercive pressures are embodied in nationalization policies. TM seems to rest on an assumption that companies can freely

source and outsource talent from one place to another. Little research has attempted to uncover regulatory hurdles in TM processes. Requiring a company to draw a certain percentage of its employees from the local population often sets up a significant hurdle in front of a rational TM process such as the one outlined by Schuler *et al.* (2011).

- (2) Mimetic pressures would refer to pressures emanating from competitive pressures that necessitate that organizations involve themselves more proactively in attracting the best talent available. This means that businesses need to attract, develop, and retain talent irrespective of whether they are locals or expatriates. Coercive pressures and mimetic pressures seem to be operating in opposite directions as far as TM in the GCC is concerned. Coercive pressures push companies to abide by legal restrictions that are sometimes not conducive to efficient TM processes. Mimetic pressures, on the other hand, drive companies to look at the best TM practices and attempt to implement them.
- (3) Normative pressures refer to the influence that norms or expected behaviors by relevant stakeholders have on a company's decisions. Organizational behavior is not a mere response to market pressures and concerns for efficiency (Leicht & Fennell, 2008). Beliefs and values are also impacted by what organizational actors perceive to be fit and customary within their professional context. Professional associations are a classic example of this phenomenon where organizational actors behave in a certain manner in response to the specific socialization within their unique professional setting. We argue that normative pressures operate in both directions depending on the power of contextual factors and also depending on how company managers perceive them. If the company adopts the perspective that localization is the right thing to do because existing or potential local talent should be given priority in being selected and developed, then normative pressures would support coercive pressures in pushing companies toward hiring such talent. If, on the other hand, companies are guided more by universal equity standards, irrespective of the origin of the talent, then localization becomes a “moral burden” or a “necessary evil” for the company. This may differ from one professional context to another – for more elaboration on normative forces, refer to Leicht and Fennell (2008).

These opposing forces constitute additional “forces and shapers” on the global TM process that need to be highlighted

for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Those pressures limit managerial ability to realize an efficient TM process, as would be suggested by TM frameworks advanced by prior research. Organizations respond to those pressures first to survive, and second, to gain legitimacy for their corporate behaviors. Evidently, these pressures often push in opposite directions. Gaining legitimacy through responding to regulatory coercive pressures may also lead to competitive disadvantage. On the other hand, failing to respond to such pressures puts companies at the risk of being prohibited to work in the host country.

According to institutional theory, players try to walk a delicate line in balancing those opposing pressures. They often resort to *decoupling*, which is a rational response to demands – such as regulatory constraints – that could be disadvantageous to the organization. Organizations adapt to such constraints by implementing actions that keep them in compliance, thus enhancing their survival prospects (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2008). Another way to explain how companies behave among these competing pressures could be understood in light of the strategic balance theory (Deephouse, 1999). Under this perspective, firms strive to strike a strategic balance between conformity (being similar) and differentiation (being different). Conformity supports legitimacy while differentiation reduces competition. To extend this to the specific case of the GCC, companies abide by (or conform to) localization rules to sustain their “legal” legitimacy, but try to become efficient through other actions (such as implementing differentiating global TM techniques) that enhance their economic sustainability.

We view, similarly to Edelman's (1992) study of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), localization laws as “social processes” in which firms are able to adapt and grow in ways that are consistent with organizational success. Organizations interact with their regulatory environment, and in reaction to coercive pressures to be able to keep a viable TM process, and at the same time not lose their legal legitimacy. Edelman (1992) suggests that laws that are “difficult to enforce invite symbolic responses”. This means that companies, facing what they perceive to be irrational laws that run contrary to organizational efficiency, use a variety of methods to adopt a façade of compliance. Some organizations adopt localization without really believing in its worth. The high level of “implementation” and low level of “internalization” (these two terms were advanced by Kostova and Roth (2002)) characterize what institutional scholars term as “ceremonial adoption” (Kostova & Roth, 2002; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Still, the extent to which these ceremonial adoptions serve their intended purpose in terms of nationalization of the workforce remains an open question. In other words, localization laws eventually could contribute to genuine development of local talent. There is some evidence, for example, to suggest that nationalization policies have indirectly led to an increase in the indigenous female talent attracted to the labor market and labor participation in general in the GCC (Rutledge, Al-Shamsi, Bassioni, & Al-Sheikh, 2011). It could also be the case that symbolic compliance could very well be realized through superficial measures, such as hiring local people in non-key positions, which never leads to real talent development.

Drawing on a qualitative study on TM across the GCC, and based on the above discussion, this study offers the following propositions:

**Proposition 1.** Coercive pressures, embodied in localization policies in the GCC context, pose a significant impediment to the TM process.

**Proposition 2.** Mimetic pressures, on the other hand, create major motivators for companies to adopt an advanced TM process.

**Proposition 3.** Organizations often adopt superficial measures to meet localization policies in order to simultaneously keep their legal legitimacy and maintain their economic sustainability.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Setting

Forty-eight interviews were conducted with managers in the GCC Region (Table 2). Two types of people were interviewed. First, we interviewed those individuals who understand and shape the understanding of talent issues in the GCC. These included policy makers, government officials, researchers, scholars, and HR professionals. Second were people who work at a mid- to senior-level in one or more GCC companies (for at least 5 years) and whose jobs entail deep operational involvement in the process of recruiting, selecting, developing, and retaining talent.

Most interviews were conducted in English (forty-six), which is widely spoken in the GCC and almost all white-collar workers have a working knowledge of this language. The interviewees were allowed to resort to code-switching (which some actually did), which is switching back and forth from English to Arabic. Code-switching allows people to choose terms that facilitate the flow of speech and communication (Feghali, 1997). The remaining two interviews were translated back from Arabic into English by an experienced translator and double-checked by the research team.

Interviews were conducted according to a specific protocol (Appendix 1). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Questions were inspired by the earlier review of the literature about TM in addition to the labor market in the GCC region (e.g. Ashton & Morton, 2005; Farndale & Paauwe, 2007; Farndale, Scullion, & Sparrow, 2010; Forstenlechner & Mellahi, 2011;

**Table 2**  
Interviewee profile.

<b>Country</b>	
Bahrain	14
Kuwait	15
Oman	14
Qatar	15
Saudi Arabia	25
UAE	27
(The numbers do not add up to 48 as many interviewees operated in more than one GCC country)	
<b>Type of company</b>	
MNC	19
Regional	15
Local	14
	48
<b>Gender</b>	
Males	43
Females	5
	48
<b>Sector</b>	
Contracting	2
Diversified	4
Education	5
Services	9
Consulting/human capital consulting	5
IT/telecommunications	7
Manufacturing	4
Non-Profit/or public sector	4
Oil & gas	2
Retail	4
Risk management/auditing	2
	48
Overall average expatriate rate	76%

**Table 3**

The research template.

1. The dynamics are different for local talent versus expatriate talent	Entitlement culture for locals Different motivational points, expatriates want financial compensation Different evaluation criteria Low willingness to develop foreign talent. They invest in “ready” foreign talent Perceptions of inequality among expatriates Large turnover of local talent Lots of competition for foreign talent Compensation is not the key driver for local talent
2. The region lags behind in terms of talent management	Only multinationals, for the most part, are able to manage a true TM process Most rated their companies as average or below average in terms of the TM process Divergence of practices between local companies and multinationals
3. Female talent has picked up but still lags behind	Lots of inter-country differences Women have come a long way but things are changing Saudi Arabia seems to be making slower developments
4. Traditional management styles pose an impediment to the development of a TM process	In terms of improving TM processes, the Arab Spring will not spill over to the corporate world Stereotyping talent The transition will be slow The General Manager as a Sheik in a <i>sheikhocracy</i> The Arab spring negatively impacted business operations in some Arab countries The link between TM and competitive advantage is not clear Nepotism and <i>wasta</i> still pose a problem

Hartmann et al., 2010; Iles, Chuai, & Preece, 2010; Joyce & Slocum, 2012; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Li & Scullion, 2010; Mäkelä, Björkman, & Ehrnrooth, 2010; McDonnell et al., 2010; Mellahi & Collings, 2010; Schuler et al., 2011; Scullion, Caligiuri, & Collings, 2010; Tarique & Schuler, 2010).

#### 4.2. Coding and template generation

This study uses template analysis, which is a qualitative research approach (King, 2004). The objective of this methodology is to develop a template through which the textual data set can be interpreted. Drawing on the literature, the researcher starts with an initial template based on the topic of interest and a preliminary analysis of part of the interviews. The analysis of the whole data set then serves to develop the final template that is used to draw the research themes.

Interview questions present the best starting point in template analysis and serve as higher-order codes (King, 2004). The interviews are used then to complement, support, or replace those higher-order codes. In this study, the initial template started with two broad categories. The first category included conceptions of what is meant by TM. The second pertained to TM practices in the GCC region. Based on the set of questions and the responses, new themes also emerged, and those were inserted to obtain the final template (see Table 3). We discuss this template later in terms of the forces of interest.

All interviews were coded. Two methods have been suggested in earlier research to improve the quality and reliability of the coding process: quality checks and reflexivity (King, 2007). Quality checks were accomplished in two ways. First, the researchers coded a sample of the data separately and then differences were sorted out and the initial template was adjusted accordingly. Another member of the research team reviewed the template as it was developed. Reflexivity means that the researcher assesses his or her own perspective and association in the research questions and research topic and the way it impacts research outcomes (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; King, 2007). The nature of the research topic could be personal in nature and a deep personal involvement could bias research assumptions, and hence research outcomes. Members of the research team iteratively reviewed the coding process, the template development, and the generation of themes stemming from such analyses in order to guard against such biases.

## 5. Results and discussion

Four main themes emerged from the interviews. We present those below in addition to the sub-themes highlighted by the different respondents:

### Theme # 1: Different dynamics for local versus expatriate talent

Talent management processes exist but there seems to be a two-tier system (local vs. foreign talent). Most interviewees were aware of the evolving concepts of talent and a “talented employee”. Almost all saw that this is not an exclusive responsibility of the HR department, as they emphasized the role of the company’s leadership and other line managers in the process.

There was a general agreement, however, that companies face different sets of challenges and opportunities when approaching local potential versus foreign talent. The TM process seems to run according to two parallel systems, one for locals and one for expatriates. We present below how companies approach those two different classes of individuals.

**1. Attracting, selecting, and developing talent:** GCC companies seem to feel an urgent need to identify and select expatriate talent that is fully operational to respond to business needs immediately after employment. Companies hire foreign employees whom they believe have sets of skills that are ready to use, or that could be put to use with little training and orientation. Companies attract locals with lower expectations. In the best-case scenario, hiring locals is done with the purpose of long-term investment in those individuals. Companies seem to be more willing to spend effort and slowly develop local talent than they would be willing to do for foreigners:

These guys (foreigners) are mercenaries. They are going to come, work, and then go again after a while when they need to put their children in school and their wives will say that: “no, I don’t want to put them here” . . . These are hired hands fit to fill a temporary need. . . we don’t see them as a resource that is long lasting, that is worth investing in. . .

In the worst-case scenario, locals are hired to respond to legal pressures to meet some quota. In many cases, the locals are not seen as talents, but as workers employed to lift regulatory pressures.

**2. Retention strategies:** Most respondents suggested that retention strategies differ for locals versus foreigners. Companies face major challenges in keeping both types of talent. While financial compensation is deemed important for both, the key attraction for foreigners are the handsome financial packages offered, compared to what they can earn in their home countries. The challenge is to keep those employees, given the possibility that they be attracted by competition in the region. This seemed to be more the case in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, where it is feasible to move from one company to the other, compared to Qatar where it is harder to change jobs because of regulatory constraints.

The challenge with locals is that many talented employees may not be willing (though still able) to cope with the demands of corporate work. This is because they could easily move into more relaxed government jobs that pay better and also involve fewer working hours.

The social-welfare system that is available for the locals in the GCC makes it very difficult for companies in the private sector to attract and keep such talent. If you offer a local an “easy” job in the public sector that pays a decent salary versus a more difficult job in the private sector that pays an equal salary, maybe even less, why would that person stay in the private sector?

In fact, a Saudi respondent indicated that in the last couple of years he witnessed a migration of talented local employees to the public sector due to their unwillingness to cope with increased organizational work demands in the private sector. The above is congruent with other studies in the region that found that locals have lower engagement scores and lower job satisfaction (Jones, 2010). Some attribute this to a sense of entitlement that some locals have. Such an entitlement culture could be proposed as a major barrier to the development of a real TM process in the GCC context.

**3. Evaluation criteria:** Some of the problems that stem from this two-tier system are that companies adopt varying evaluation criteria when assessing local versus expatriate talent. This stems from contextual pressures that force some companies to become easier on locals in certain instances:

There definitely are two standards: one for nationals and one for expatriates. People are treated differently. . . a local who is perceived to be “talented” may not make the mark had he been a foreigner.

This difference in evaluation creates perceptions of inequity among expatriates. While this could pose a problem for many companies, such perceptions are not as drastic as one would imagine. Many expatriates are either perfectly content with their own pay packages and/or they accept the entitlement that comes around for locals:

In many instances, the pay structure is impacted by nationality. For many American and European workers, they couldn’t care less about what locals are getting as long as their own packages are attractive. For others, they kind of accept such entitlements. . . it is their country, they say. . .

#### **Theme #2: The region still lags in TM processes.**

When asked about the extent that their companies manage the TM process, most individuals were moderately pessimistic. When asked directly about how companies in the region fare compared to Western companies, most indicated that the region still lags behind. The only exceptions were some multinationals that successfully imported their best foreign TM practices:

[The people at this MNC] are doing an excellent job in keeping their talented employees. People don’t want to change their jobs and many want to join. . . I think this is because of the leadership style . . . and the very good culture which engages people and retains employees.

The interviews showed a divergence of practices between local/regional companies and MNCs. The former seemed to be still struggling to institute a successful TM process. It is apparent that MNCs are better able to withstand the contextual pressures that they face as far as labor regulations are concerned. The recent transitional nature of HRM in local/regional companies from what was “personnel administration” a few years ago to today’s TM processes can explain this finding (Ebrasu & Al Ariss, 2012). Conversely, multinationals come to the region with their already well-established HR systems that give them a competitive advantage. All in all, the concept of talent management seems to be under-developed in the region, even among some companies that claim to understand and use it:

. . . the concept of talent management does not exist the way we see it. Almost every single client we deal with when we ask them to identify their challenges and weaknesses, talent management is mentioned by most. So they don’t have a formal talent-management program. Sometimes, they pretend or claim they have it . . .but I don’t think they do. . .

#### **Theme #3: Female talent has picked up but still much needs to be done**

The interviews uncovered a context that is increasingly welcoming of female talent, but still far from being equitable. There also seems to be lots of inter-country differences. UAE and Bahrain seem to be doing very well, relatively, in the way that female talent is perceived and managed. In Saudi Arabia, however, despite recent improvements, the country is still making slower progress.

In UAE, companies are way ahead of all the other countries in giving women a chance to capitalize on their skills to reach high executive positions, so you see them as CEOs, VP level, and directors. Qatar is also doing very well in that regard. In Saudi Arabia women are not ever dreaming of reaching upper positions. They are struggling to find a job, and thus lots of talent is being wasted.

Some respondents complained about cultural stereotypes and the prevalence of expected societal roles that prevent the development of female talent:

In our company (Bahrain), we develop our people irrespective of whether they are male or female. Yet when we offer females training opportunities outside Bahrain, many are not willing to go outside on their own without a male family member.

When asked whether being local or foreign makes a difference in terms of talent development for women employees, most responded in the affirmative. Managers and societies in the GCC realize that there is a difference between local females and foreign females. The latter are not subjected to the same social expectations:

Many local men would be willing to work with a foreign female worker, but would be hesitant to work with a local female. Many are uncomfortable to work under the supervision of a female director, but their level of discomfort would be higher if working under the supervision of a local female.

Companies cognizant of gender stereotypes in the region as well as local cultural expectations discussed above – especially pertaining to local females – would find it hard to cope with managing talent among that demographic group. This poses roadblocks in organizational ability to properly manage their local female talent. Interestingly, most companies did not have a strategic affirmative action program targeting talented women. Therefore, not only the social factors were challenging to women's TM, but also the organizational contexts were not strategically engaging with this issue.

**Theme #4: Traditional management styles in the GCC context pose an impediment to the development of a genuine TM process.**

Most respondents exhibited a gloomy perspective regarding current managerial practices in the Arab/GCC context. They emphasized that such practices create an environment that is not conducive to proper talent attraction, development, and retention. Many, for example, mentioned “wasta,” which means the improper use of connections to achieve certain personal or organizational ends (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings & Weir, 2006). This is congruent with what earlier research has suggested to be typical, not only of GCC countries but of Arab business environments in general (see for example Sidani & Thornberry, 2010, 2013).

Some respondents indicated that certain company managers run their companies in an authoritarian manner. They asserted that such a style of management does not facilitate the attraction of talent, and more importantly, is incompatible with the retention of talent in the long run. This is again congruent with earlier research that, in depicting a typical Arab manager, gave the metaphor of the sheikh (*sheikhocracy*) who governs a tribe (Ayubi, 1990; Finlay, Neal, Catana, & Catana, 2005). The sheikh (general manager) expects absolute obedience and is not willing to be questioned. “*Sheikhocracy*” is not conducive to the development of a proper TM framework in organizations.

When discussing recent changes in the Arab world over the last couple of years, and whether these are likely to positively impact corporate environments, most respondents were skeptical:

It is a different game. Changes at the political level will not lead to change within corporate environment – at least not in the short run. It will take years before any meaningful change will materialize. Many Arab managers feel threatened by their younger talented employees and are likely to fight them rather than helping them reach their potential.

Some respondents, however, were more optimistic regarding the new generation of local employees:

Remember that in the GCC most of the current managers are first-generation employees. Their fathers and grandfathers did not have the concept of being employed by someone else. They were either merchants or fishermen, or they worked in agriculture. As time goes by, nationalization strategies will help locals better understand the concept of being employed and would then prefer to use their talent in their companies. It will change – probably slowly – but eventually it will change.

Interestingly, Arab Spring movements were seen to stall business operations and projects in countries like Egypt, but not in the GCC countries. Many talented employees leave their countries of origin, such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, among others, and are increasingly becoming available for companies in the more politically stable Arab Gulf region.

Another key concept that many respondents seemed to share was the idea of stereotyping talent. The GCC has a diverse working

population and certain nationalities have been better identified to be talented in a certain industry or function:

Most managers classify people's talents based on nationality. Indians are talented accountants; the Lebanese are talented in sales and marketing etc. I don't necessarily buy this perspective, but it is there. I've seen it, I've lived it.

This perspective has implications for TM both in terms of talent attraction and development. Employees are more likely to look for a specific talent among a certain nationality and chances are, they are more likely to develop talent that fits a certain stereotype. Talent development thus becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

We advanced three propositions regarding TM in the GCC context. Drawing on our research findings and thematic analysis, the complexity of the TM process in this context becomes evident. Proposition 1 suggested that localization in the GCC poses major impediments in the TM process. This was found to be the case to a large extent. Requiring companies to employ a minimum percentage of local people creates an added challenge to an efficient TM process. Localization could lead to the classification of a certain class of people among a “talent pool” who would otherwise not make it had they been of foreign origin. Some locals are therefore automatically attached to TM programs, yet without a serious commitment from them or their organizations to TM issues. Therefore, compared to TM processes in Western contexts, there is a need to take into account the existence of “symbolic talent management” in regions of the world like the GCC, which does not always correspond to descriptions of TM in the literature. On the other hand, localization does present an opportunity for companies to be more proactive in targeting certain groups of individuals who would have otherwise been ignored. Respondents indicated that companies often go out of their way to uncover hidden local talent. In other words, they spend lots of resources trying to attract and retain local talent, but the return on investment, at least as far as organizational efficiency is concerned, does not seem to be worthwhile. Unfortunately, superficial measures to comply with local regulations could in fact defeat the purpose of the law. Yet, sometimes creating the structures for developing local talent, even without a sincere effort to meet its purpose, could pay off in the long-run. Edelman (1992) indicated that decoupling in the EEO case did not prevent the gradual improvement of equal opportunity in the workplace. The same could happen in the GCC context. Irrespective of the negative perceived role of local laws in impacting the TM process, the mere existence of such laws and the organizational efforts to abide by them, would eventually help in a better process as far as local talent is concerned. Also these same laws are subject to continuous improvements by the governments of the GCC countries. This is an area of interest for future researchers to uncover the role of localization in developing a sound TM process, especially one pertaining to the local populations of the GCC.

The second proposition advances the notion that the competitive environment in the GCC will lead to mimetic pressures on organizations to implement an effective TM process. The results indicate that companies are aware of the importance of talent and sometimes try to institute best practices in that regard. The respondents overwhelmingly identified the link between a sound TM process and competitive advantage. Yet, at the same time, they indicated that there is still lots of ground to cover. Many expressed the belief that TM practices in the GCC still lag behind modern practices in Western organizations, especially in Arab local and regional companies, as opposed to more experienced multinationals in terms of HRM practices. The results also suggest

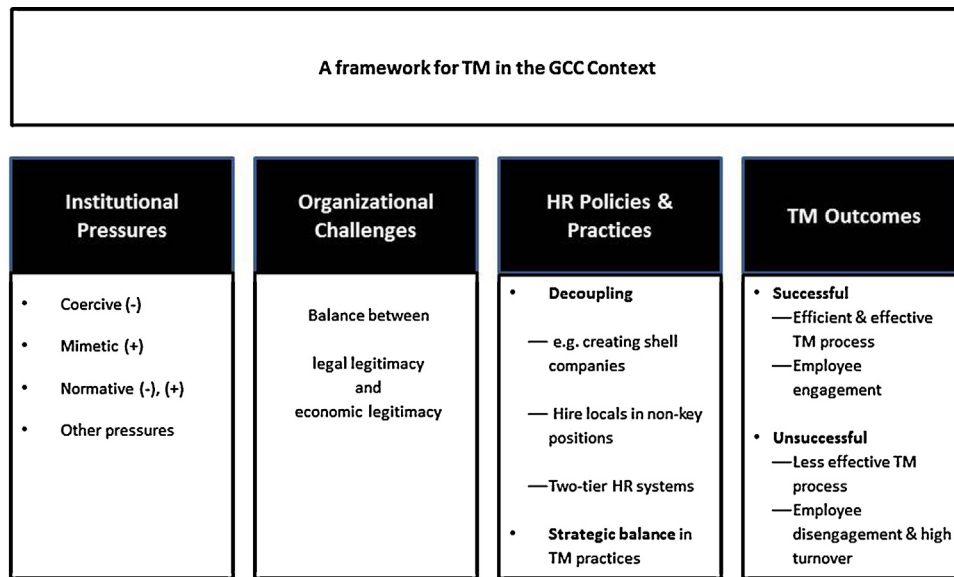


Fig. 2. A framework for TM in the GCC Context.

that local managers, socialized in a traditional mindset, still exercise unhealthy styles of management that obstruct proper TM practices. Future research is invited to uncover the degree of prevalence of modern TM processes in organizations led by local managers versus those led by expatriate managers. This could shed some light on the role of company leadership in facilitating or impeding the TM process. Companies that want to operate outside their traditional markets need to know such differences between local/expatriate management as this would eventually impact their performance and HR systems. This proved to be the case in the GCC region.

The third proposition referred to the notion that companies often use *decoupling* in trying to balance among competing pressures. This was evident from the data where almost all interviewees indicated that companies perceive localization as a burden, a necessary evil. They try to meet the required numbers and percentages without immersing themselves in the bigger picture of why they are doing so. Companies, for the most part, are not able to see any moral worthiness in localization and instead utilize measures to mitigate such burdens. At the same time, many companies look at foreign talent as talent that should be initially developed and ready for immediate deployment, and they expect a fast return on their investment. In other words, they are willing to put large quantities of time, energy, and company resources into attracting the right foreign talent, yet they seem less willing to spend the same level of effort on developing it. Foreign talent is often looked at as “hired talent” that is ready to go and fit to serve company needs in the short-run. Accordingly, it is subjected to stricter scrutiny and evaluation. Future research should attempt to uncover the impact of inequitable HR systems on the TM process. For example, one could argue that the sense of entitlement that some local employees have prevents them from exerting serious personal effort in the TM process. At the same time, feelings of inequity in evaluation and other HR practices could arguably prevent foreign workers from seriously embracing TM initiatives.

Based on the above findings and discussion, and starting from the framework presented by Schuler et al. (2011), Fig. 2 portrays how forces impact the TM process and offers a descriptive model of managerial efforts aiming at institutionalizing the TM process. This model could explain how some companies struggle with the TM process because of the various pressures they are exposed to. This model is comprised of four key areas: (1) pressures on the TM

process, (2) organizational challenges, (3) HR practices, and (4) outcomes. This is related to the earlier description of forces that face companies. Coercive forces, embodied in localization laws, create a negative impact on TM initiatives, irrespective of the supposed long-term contribution to the local population. Mimetic forces, embodied in organizational attempts to copy best TM practices with the awareness of how these would gain competitive advantage, present a positive force toward instituting a modern TM process. Normative forces could work in various directions depending on different contextual forces and how those are perceived by management. There are also other pressures, internal and external, that have been outlined in prior research (Farndale & Paauwe, 2007; Schuler et al., 2011). All such pressures create major challenges for companies, the most notable of which is the task of balancing between compliance that ensures legal legitimacy, and a competitive TM process that ensures economic legitimacy. Trying to achieve such a balance, in many cases, leads to *decoupling*, where companies search for ways to make symbolic changes that help in attaining an equilibrium. In the case of TM in the GCC, companies resort to various measures that include (1) creating independent shell companies to hire foreign talent through outsourcing agreements, thus helping to keep the company's required nationalization percentages, (2) hiring locals in non-key positions, and (3) implementing a two-tier system for evaluation, training and development, and compensation for locals versus foreigners. Companies thus try to strike a strategic balance between local adaptation and global assimilation of their TM processes. The outcomes of such decoupling and strategic balancing – as the model shows – are mixed. Some companies are able to accomplish performance-based objectives and implement what they perceive to be a good enough system of TM. In other cases, companies are less successful and become hesitant to claim that they have a TM process in effect. Future research should empirically assess the actual impact of nationalization and the two-tier system on corporate performance and employment indicators in the GCC and other similar contexts.

## 7. Managerial relevance

Several recommendations of practical relevance can be presented from our research to GCC governments, local and regional companies, and more broadly, MNCs. Local GCC

governments do well to understand the vitality of local talent and the importance of creating a legal infrastructure that facilitates the process of indigenous talent development. Yet it is important to note that the legal route is not the only vehicle by which local talent can be groomed. Organizations behave according to a set of constraints, and they are often able to maneuver what they perceive to be an irrational legal structure. Serious work on the education front has to continue, not only to upgrade the skills of the local workforce, but also to gradually institute a cultural mindset that is more accepting of the notion of fair competition away from the entitlement culture that does nothing but eradicate young talent. Special attention has also to be given to mechanisms that facilitate the development of local female talent as this seems to be a demographic group that is still not put into proper use.

Local and regional companies should take the lead in instituting mechanisms that uncover and develop local talent. Some are actually doing just that such as the National Saudi Bank in Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi National Energy Company in the UAE. Such companies are instituting policies that increase the likelihood that local talent is identified, developed, and retained. Yet it is evident that more needs to be done since GCC companies, as indicated in the above discussion, still suffer from an inability to make use of local talent in sufficient numbers. Local and regional companies should shift from an approach whereby global TM practices are imported and implemented as is, into a more rational process that takes into consideration the specific context of the GCC countries. In addition, our research shows that some local management strategies (e.g. *sheikhocracy*) may obstruct the implementation of TM practices and, as such, these need to be reconsidered.

MNCs should adopt similar mechanisms that apply to local firms in terms of the necessity to develop local talent. MNCs need also to be aware, as explained earlier, of the strategic balance that must be made between global integration of TM practices and local adaptation. Nationalization strategies should not be perceived as a necessary evil where ceremonial adoption leads to mere compliance with minimum employment quotas for nationals. MNCs are powerful institutions, and the depth and breadth of their operations in GCC countries often put them in positions where they can offer substantive suggestions to lawmakers that would help in the production of a legal process that is more rewarding not only to MNCs themselves, but also to a whole generation of local GCC nationals whose talents, skills, and potential are grossly under-utilized. More broadly, there are strong institutional and cultural forces that do not always converge with what is found in Western TM contexts. In our study, such forces have proved to shape the business success of companies operating across the GCC region. Therefore, business leaders and managers in MNCs should not assume a taken-for-granted convergence of TM when managing people internationally.

## Appendix I

1. What does the word “talent” mean to you? Please explain.
2. What role do you see for the HR manager and the HR team in the process of attracting, developing, and retaining talent? Do you see TM as part of HRM or do you have a different perspective of TM?
3. What are the key challenges that face organizations in attracting talent in your business? Are there any hurdles to doing this in your context? Do you find that your specific location carries some advantages and disadvantages regarding talent attraction and retention?
4. How do you keep track of your best performers and what do you do with them? How do you make sure you are not missing

- out on key talent already inside your organization? How about weak performers? What should a company do with them?
5. How does your company deal with nationalization policies? What do you think of them? What are the differences between managing talents of expatriates versus locals?
6. What attributes do talented people (or best performers) in your company share: nationality, age, gender, psychological attributes ... etc.? Does this vary by industry or type of job?
7. Please explain how does performance management/appraisal at your company, or companies, in your context meet your goals in identifying and keeping your key talents?
8. How do you handle talent coming from the young generation? Do you see and how do you see the impact of the Arab spring movements on young talent? Do you witness talented employees moving from one firm to another? Why? How can companies cope with this?
9. How does your company manage the gender diversity of their talented employees? Do you see any challenges in managing female talent in your context? How do you – or companies in your context – cope with such challenges?
10. How can companies ensure that generic skills and talents by employees will end up being beneficial for the specific context in which they work? In other words, how do we ensure that “individual” skills and talents become company competitive points of strength?
11. How can companies ensure that the aggregation of talents that they have will lead to competitive advantage? How can a company safeguard the possibility of having lots of talents that cannot work together? What is your experience in that regard?
12. What happens when talents collide (superstar employees have conflicting aspirations, interests, and perceptions)? What is the role of the organization in creating an environment of collaboration not competition? Can you provide specific examples?
13. How would you rate, from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong), the organization in which you work in terms of its ability to
  - (1) attract talent
  - (2) retain talent
  - (3) facilitate talents working together?

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