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# Exploring the Human Resource and Business Strategies in the Middle East to COVID-19

Dr. Ali Abou Abbas, MPM, D.B.A.

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### ABSTRACT

The implications arising from the suddenness of emergence and rapid onset of the COVID-19 on business have been remarkable in disruptions to traditional employment, with the extreme virulence and fear of mortality of the disease. The aim of this qualitative, case study was to explore the strategies by the management of the Middle East (MEA) organizations and discern encountered by company management managers in the proactive adaptations necessary for complying with the healthcare mandates on safe distancing with business sustainability. The target population involved interviews of 5 managers in the MEA, who have provided insight into the strategies in addressing the challenges imposed by the pandemic. The key themes of this study were a) focus on maintaining business sustainability during the tough and debilitating period; b) pay more attention to employees' morale, motivation, and empathy; c) ensure training for employees to cope with innovation and to show prowess. The findings from this study may contribute to emerging knowledge of business adaptations in negotiating the difficult terrain of achieving business sustainability while protecting employees and by default, the community.

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### Introduction

COVID-19 has had a destructive impact on economies worldwide, disrupting supply chains and production networks and restricting the flow of goods and services, capital and movement, and affecting trade and businesses in the Middle East Region (MEA). The spread of Covid-19 and the actions to contain it have had a dramatic impact on the MEA economy; per the International Monetary Fund, the Middle East economy has shrunk by 3.3 per cent in 2020 (Bambridge, 2020).

In this era of COVID, leaders have faced enormous, competing, and defies as they continue to navigate the impacts of the pandemic (Mckinsey, 2020). These significant challenges have extended to employees and organizations around the globe as they try to maintain business sustainability and profitability, creating new 'norms' on maintaining a safe distance between employees. Many organizations are already taking "no regret" actions in order to emerge from the pandemic in a stronger position. Those leaders are facing the crisis with a spirit of reinvention, accelerating digital transformation, establishing variable cost structures, and implementing agile operations (Sneader & Singhal, 2020). During this period, leaders have been obligated to make responsible decisions to keep their organizations on track. As a result, those who manage the economic effects of the crisis in a clear and merciful way will create more value for their companies and come out stronger after the pandemic (Tarki, Levy, & Weiss, 2020).

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore strategies of organizations' leaders to encourage employees

safe distancing during the pandemic and uncover strategies and approaches of business leaders to ensure business sustainability. The targeted population comprised of 5 business leaders or head of departments who have implemented successful strategies to shift business from offline to online with consideration of the business sustainability and profitability, employee's motivation, moral and confidence, and maintain safe distancing. Proponents of working online cite several advantages of the online environment that makes it ideal for collaborative groups. Working remotely is growing rapidly to attract more than 70 million employees based on convenience and flexibility as well as a more contextual schedule and agenda (Smith, R. O. 2005).

#### Conceptual Framework

The theory chosen to underpin the study was the strategic flexibility theory, postulated by Evans (1991). The lens of the theory of strategic flexibility provided a vantage point to understand the responsiveness of firms to economic and other pressures, the benefits of a proactive rather than a reactive attitude, and the ability to do something other than originally intended (Bock, Opsahl, George, & Gann, 2012). Conceptually, the developers of the strategic flexibility theory have suggested, that the ability of the organization to take appropriate action in response to external changes often reflects the strategic capability and disposition of a business (Robert & Stockport, 2014). Aaker and Mascarenhas (1984) employed the strategic flexibility theory to understand how an uncertain environment create the need for strategic adaptation while Sanchez (1995) suggested that the strategic flexibility reflects the inherent flexibility of companies to apply

resources in innovative, adaptive, and alternative ways and measures, to negotiate a constantly changing environment (Robert & Stockport, 2014).

### Constraints

All research studies have strengths and weaknesses; however, research constraints represent potential internal and external weaknesses that could affect the study (Connelly, 2013). In studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the MEA region, we faced many constraints when this crisis was new and companies had no experience in such a situation. In this qualitative case study, the primary constraint was that HR departments in MEA companies were not involved in strategic planning and implementation, since all these decisions came from the top management. Another constraint was the difficulty in finding companies that were developing strategies for safe employee distancing, as all the companies were just following their governments' rules. In addition, it was difficult to obtain data from companies and to verify these data to be sure they were accurate. The final constraint was that the leaders of companies were conservative about providing and sharing such information for different reasons such as privacy, accuracy, or suspicion over being suspected of non-compliance with governments rules.

### Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was: What human resources strategies minimize workforce disruptions in pursuit of beneficial business solutions amidst the pandemic?

The following interview questions served to elicit responses that subscribed to the theme of the overarching research question:

1. What are some HR strategies you have had to implement to COVID-19?
2. How did you handle some of the challenges faced in transitioning employees to work remotely from home or in company premises?
3. How are employees monitored with remote working and what are the challenges?
4. How will social distancing or the "new norm" affect future business?
5. What advice would you give to other human resource managers that you think could be viable to incorporate to remain competitive with other businesses?

### Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies of organizations' leaders to encourage safe employee distancing during the pandemic, and to uncover the strategies and approaches of business leaders to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. The findings of this study may be significant for managers in the MEA region, as the knowledge generated may contribute to overcoming obstacles to developing and implementing strategies for employees to work remotely, and to be agile when working in a changing landscape in the future.

Also, for HR departments, especially those in local companies in the region that were not involved in establishing and implementing strategies to shift their businesses to working online and in setting up rules for safe social distancing, the findings of this study could provide fruitful insights for HR managers and employees in order to get experience and knowledge. This could lead to changes in their organizations' structures and give more responsibility to the HR departments, in collaboration with top management, for being involved in taking decisions in such situations. An essential point is that the findings of this study may highlight

the importance of increasing awareness about the benefits of working online, and that these strategies can reduce organizational costs and increase employee productivity if they are implemented in a professional way.

### A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies of organizations' leaders to encourage employees safe distancing during the pandemic and uncover strategies and approaches of business leaders to ensure business sustainability. Despite extensive research on the impact of Covid-19 on HR strategies and n business sustainability in the MENA region, few researchers have sought to reveal the factors that may help company leaders to implement successful strategies. The literature review for this study also encompasses different scholarly insights and concepts to add to the depth of the research study and inquiry.

Topics discussed in this literature review includes a critical review of the professional and academic papers pertaining to the challenges and intricacies of effectively planning and implementing change strategies. The sources for the literature review included peer-reviewed scholarly studies from a leading University Library. The literature was sourced from the academic database of Pro-Quest, Emerald Management Journals, and Sage Full-Text Collections. Additional resources were obtained through searching various journal articles, published books, and other credible online publications such as Thoreau, the EBSCOhost database, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Questia, and others credible sources of information and journal sources.

### Strategic Flexibility

The theory of strategic flexibility served to advance understanding of the ability of the MEA company leaders to adapt to internal and external change by rapidly responding to also mitigating risks (Sushil, 2015). The conceptual framework of strategic flexibility proposed by Evans (1991) denotes flexibility of actions taken prior and after any change has taken place (Fan, Wu, & Wu, 2013). Fernandez-Perez, García-Morales, and Pullés (2016) stressed the importance to customize resources quickly to respond to internal and environmental change. Companies with higher strategic flexibility are adaptive and capable of marshalling its resources to also counteract to competitor maneuvers. Firms with lower strategic flexibility often in contrast often lack the ability to adapt to changing situations and environment (Kurt & Hlland, 2013).

Many strategists have stressed the importance of strategic flexibility within the organization at the level of planning, development, and technology, and to embrace change (Fernández-Pérez, José Verdú-Jóver, & Benitez-Amado, 2013). Nurdiani, Fricker, and Börstler (2014) affirmed that there are two levels of change associated with strategic flexibility: strategic and operational. Some strategists have linked adaptive capabilities to organizational structure and development process within the organization. Instilling a strategic flexibility disposition, is often associated with fostering and innovative culture that limits resistance to change and promotes an organization structure of less complexity, which often bodes well for the management to focus on new opportunities (Bock et al., 2012).

Kurt et al. (2013) opined that strategic flexibility could be connected to various functional areas within the organization such as management, marketing, operation, and finance. A high level of strategic flexibility capability contributes to long-term sustainability and growth of any organization and build a maturity level for the ecosystem (Sushil, 2015). Bock et al. (2012) shared the view of Sushil

(2015), affirming that companies with high level of strategic flexibility can respond quickly to changing environments through the adjustment of organizational learning and innovation, which gives the organization longevity. To achieve efficient strategic flexibility, business innovators requires a nuanced assessment of the relationship between structural changes, managerial awareness, and change control (Fan et al., 2013). Al-Zu'bi (2016) stressed the importance of building strategic flexibility in an organization to achieve competitive advantage, agility, and adaptive capabilities to the realities of the environment in which it operates in. In the context of the organization, leaders' style and efficient knowledge management are fundamental to strategic flexibility success (Bock et al., 2012).

Among the different concepts of strategic flexibility, managerial perspectives, and leader responsibilities often play an important role in reacting rapidly to current and emerging environmental change. The strategic flexibility capability, therefore, helps managers and decision-makers to build an environment with higher degrees of productivity (Ahmadi, Salamzadeh, Daraei, & Akbari, 2012). From the cognitive perspective, Fernandez-Perez et al. (2016) stressed the influence of the external relationship leaders with other actors outside their organization in achieving strategic flexibility. Innovative leaders often seek to extend the organization activities by exploring novel opportunities and creating strategic options, therefore, enhancing strategic flexibility (Bock et al., 2012). Increasing external social networking with top managers of other companies in the same industry enable leaders to be aware of the valuable information, knowledge, available resources that can utilize to mitigate uncertainties and help make the right decisions (Fernandez-Perez et al., 2013). The operational flexibilities within an organization are related to the ability and knowledge of leaders to acquire resources to provide a base for any company to practice strategic flexibility, as it would require to re-employ resources in accordance with the strategic change (Sushil, 2015). Kurt and Hulland (2013) shared the view of Sushil (2015) that managers who command significantly greater resources need to have comprehensive knowledge and understanding on the advantages of implementing strategic flexibility. to make appropriate decisions. Fernandez-Perez et al. (2013) stressed on the importance the personality and disposition of leaders, contributing to promote strategic flexibility efficiently, in achieving higher performance within the organization.

Innovative business strategies are considered as one of the core concepts for companies to maintain sustainability. The success of such decisions related to HR and business strategies usually hinges on the manager's sophisticated awareness of local regulations, resources, and customers preferences as well as desire to make necessary adaptations (Magnusson et al., 2013). Kurt et al. (2013) noted that previous studies related to strategic flexibility have not considered the impacts on organizational business strategies. Kurt et al. contended that strategic flexibility of rivals is the primary factor for the relationship between business strategy and firm's value, where companies allocate significant amounts of funds to gain competitive merit over their competitors.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The research method and design can constrain a research project and needs careful regard. A researcher can choose a qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach to conduct a study (Boeije, Van Wesel, & Slagt, 2014). When

there is a lack of information about a phenomenon under study or when the research problem is complicated, the qualitative method is often the appropriate (Bowling, 2014). The qualitative approach was most suitable for this study because there was a significant lack of information related to strategies used by company leaders to shift business from offline to online. The absence of studies and the paucity of information related to HR and business strategies used during the covid-19 the MEA region presented the need for further research.

In this study, the qualitative methodology helped to understand how executive and marketing managers formulate a strategy, who in the organization implements the strategy, and how success or failure is gauged, as advocated by influential researchers (Yin, 2014). In a qualitative study, the focus of the researcher primarily includes seeking information from participants about real-world events and processes or about personal experiences (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Researchers often use the qualitative approach to understand the perspectives and experiences of individuals or groups and to explore phenomena, often by relying on interviewing participants through open-ended questions, related documents, and observing behavior (O'Brien et al., 2014).

### **Research Design**

A case study approach was convenient to use from among the other four designs, as researchers have expressed the limitations of the other designs in providing flexibility, diversity, and knowledge needed for a problem context (Hyett et al., 2014). A case study design helped to understand the strategies company leaders have used to achieve profitability and maintain organizational sustainability in the MEA region. The case study design provides the researcher with a deep holistic view of the research problem under study and affords the opportunity to understand and properly explain the situation (Baskarada, 2014). A case study is often constructed and designed to fit the problem and research question and demonstrate broad diversity in the study design (Hyett et al., 2014). The selection of a descriptive qualitative case study design served to gain an innate understanding of the factors that affect the implementation of HR and business strategies in the local companies in the MEA region.

Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2015) noted that data saturation is a technique that applies to all qualitative studies as researchers employ interviews as the primary data collection strategy. Fusch and Ness (2015) defined data saturation as the point when a researcher has collected enough information from study participants, either in one or multiple interview sessions. The data saturation stage is reached when beyond the single or multiple interviews with the study sample, no new information pertinent to the research objective emerges, indicative that the completeness of information sought has been reached and denoting that cessation in data collection is logical. For this study, a homogeneous purposeful sample of five leaders and heads of departments in local companies in the MEA region helped to guarantee an acceptable pool of interview data. In a qualitative study, the consistency in design of the interview questions facilitates asking all participants the same questions, as the aim is to reach data saturation and uniformity in a structured, logical, and informative discourse.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

As indicated, five open-ended and semi structured interview questions served to explore strategies of organizations' leaders to encourage employees safe distancing during the pandemic and uncover strategies and approaches

of business leaders to ensure business sustainability in the Middle East region. The goal was to glean insight into successful strategist abilities to ensure business sustainability and employees safe distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic and best practices to shift business from offline to online. The overarching research question that guided this study was: What human resources strategies minimize workforce disruptions, in pursuit of beneficial business solutions amidst the pandemic? The process of data collection included interviewing five participants, with specific experience in successful planning and implementing strategies in the MEA region during the pandemic to shift business from offline to online and create an effective guideline for safe distancing. The open-ended questions facilitated participants to freely express and share a diversity of experiences, insights, and best practices in the realm of business shifting in the MEA. After the recording of interviews, transcription of each interview followed, which created the data for analysis. Coding helped to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants, by disguising participant names as sequential codes (e.g., CXPX) where the first letter in each code refers to the company and the second letter refers to the participant. The major themes which emerged from the analysis of data were related to a) focus on maintaining business sustainability during the tough and debilitating period; b) pay more attention to employees' morale, motivation, and empathy; c) ensure training for employees to cope with innovation and to show prowess.

### **Theme 1: Maintaining business sustainability during a tough and debilitating period.**

Theme 1 emerged from the analysis of participants' responses to the 5 interview questions, where participants were asked to offer their opinions about the strategies to maintain business sustainability used by company leaders in the Middle East during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants stressed the importance of strategic flexibility and a leadership vision when the pandemic lockdown began in order to make the right decisions immediately due to the need to ensure that the businesses would be maintained.

Participants indicated that some organizations, especially those dealing with international companies, enabled flexibility for employees as to when they could start and finish their working day based on specific personal circumstances. However, some companies reduced salaries in response to the decrease of the revenue in order to survive for a longer period, while other companies decided to lay off some employees to reduce costs.

One of the main challenges initially facing companies was their inability to meet clients, which affected sales revenues and incomes, and therefore many companies tried to accelerate the adoption of video conference programs to stay in contact with clients and team members. It should be noted that at the beginning of this process, however, many countries in the MEA prohibited the use of video conferences programs such as Skype, Zoom, Teams, and so on.

Participants also expressed that companies had tried developing and adopting different solutions to overcome challenges that emerged during the period of businesses shifting to working online. These challenges forced immediate and crucial action by business leaders to mitigate the risks of additional costs, to keep an eye on the financial indicators to find an equilibrium between expenses and income, and to classify their priorities.

Some participants affirmed that some sectors had utilized remote-working before the pandemic, and therefore for these companies, taking their businesses online was not a

problem; however, other sectors and companies that were attempting this approach for the first time faced significant problems. The implementation of new systems to work virtually was a challenge for most companies, especially for small and medium enterprises that did not have experience in operating online. Some companies created their own plans to help people adapt to the new systems, while others got support and help either privately or from their governments.

Participants stated that the pandemic outbreak and the transition to work online imposed an acceleration in digital transformation initiatives. However, this transformation created a kind of uncertainty about the future of businesses and the methods that people should use, especially for tasks that required high levels of planning and discussion. Some businesses that are based on people interactions, such as event and conference organizers, have been confused about the future of how these events would be organized, whether people would be able to participate, and how it would affect marketing activities and sponsorships.

### **Theme 2: Pay more attention to employees' morale, motivation, and empathy.**

The second theme emerging from the interviews was caring about employees. Participants shared different points of view concerning employees during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some participants stated that some companies ignored employees' situations during the pandemic, and that some of them cut employee salaries and that others laid off some of their team members. Leaders found that daily evaluations of employee performance and productivity could help them control and track the implementation of the new strategy, and would also help the employees to overcome the challenges and problems they might face due to psychological pressure from the daily control and guidance of their supervisors and leaders.

Participants stressed that strict rules and guidelines had been applied by companies to ensure their employees' safety, and also that companies had tried to create effective and open communication systems within their teams to ensure that everyone would understand the new system and be aligned with it. Eventually, the theme was reflected in that companies had created healthcare programs to ensure employee safety in case they were working on-site, providing them with daily update about the rules and regulations, and trying to create healthy environments with an emphasis on teamwork.

A particularly important decision taken by leaders was to share the best practices with all employees within the organization in order to ensure that all the employees were aware of them. Participants stressed the importance of following internal and external rules and guidelines and of keeping employees updated. Also, participants expressed that employee motivation and training were the keys to success and sustainability for any company facing today's challenges and that all companies must invest in people to benefit from their innovation. According to participants' observations, they realized that caring about employees and motivating them will increase creativity and innovation within a team and enhance teamwork.

Create an effective virtual teamwork system was not an easy task for leaders, as it involves daily meetings through different communication platforms to align team members with the new system and create a healthy environment. Some participants indicated that certain companies had used different strategies to keep them motivated and support them through things such as online entertainment or special sessions with psychologists in order to maintain employees'

spirits and confidence and reduce their stress and pressure. As a result, as per some participants, these activities helped employees to focus on work, reduce their pressure, and improve their mental health.

### **Theme 3: Training for employees to cope with innovation and to show prowess.**

All the participants considered that training and development for employees during this period were essential. The transition to working online imposed an acceleration in digital transformation initiatives; however, this transformation has created dilemmas for employees and leaders to adapt along with the new technologies. Participants affirmed that these new technologies would positively affect the businesses, and they considered that working flexible hours through these platforms increased employees productivity and performance especially, if it was supported by effective training and good communication methods.

In general, companies tried developing and adapting different solutions to overcome challenges emerging during the transition period, with the common task being to train employees, examine their ability to work virtually, and ensure productivity. Shifting businesses online involved the acceleration of special training for employees in order to engage them and ensure that they understood the new working process. As well, in addition to the special training related to business processes, companies encouraged employees to participate in soft skills training to improve their communication, teamwork, leadership skills, and so on.

### **Application to Professional Practice**

The participants' answers revealed many insights that could provide best practices and help business leaders implement them in their organizations. The discoveries from this study may expand the current knowledge on the role of HR departments and managers in preparing and implementing strategies to overcome challenges during crises. The findings of this study revealed that HR departments in the Middle East region were not involved in this type of decision-making process and that there was a lack of experience and knowledge for planning and implementing changes in strategies. In MEA companies, these tasks are given to managers and leaders to drive any change, and HR involvement is not common within organizations.

The insights from this study could also contribute to furthering the awareness of business practices and strategic imperatives to invest in new technology, since comments by participants revealed that companies trying to implement new technological systems and train employees to use these platforms have faced significant challenges, such as creating evaluation benchmarks and maintaining work efficiency. Also, one important task is to engage employees in using this technology efficiently and to communicate effectively through these platforms both internally and externally. Outlining the challenges associated with HR and business strategy implementation may make the findings of this study relevant and applicable to the professional practices of the MEA region, especially by keeping an eye on employee motivation and trying to create healthy environments

### **Goals and Next Steps**

We have witnessed how many companies in the MEA region have struggled during the lockdown period amid their shifts to online business models, and we have tried to help those companies by providing them with free consultancy and training to deal with these shifts with the lowest risks and damage. The objective of this research is to reveal some of the challenges facing MEA companies and provide them with

best practices and solutions to put them on track again. We are trying to share some successful experiences from people who were prepared and who quickly adapted to their new situations.

From the business side, the insights from this research could help HR managers and employees to start being more involved in planning and implementing strategies and being able to have flexibility in modifying any strategy at lower risks and costs. However, from the academic side, the findings of this research may provide new approaches to students and higher educational institutes regarding the role of HR departments, which could create a significant positive change in the new understanding of the HR concept in order to become aligned with international standards.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The pandemic outbreak has revealed that the role of HR departments is crucial for organizations. To succeed in implementing changes in strategy and to better mitigate risks, especially during crises, companies must develop rigid business structures with strategic flexibility to adapt to internal and external changes by modifying their strategies in order to quickly respond in proactive as well as reactive ways.

During the coronavirus pandemic, leaders who had this knowledge and an adaptive mindset were able to adapt quickly and align with new changes and rules. Also, we advise company leaders to create effective communication systems to ensure that all employees understand the process and are aligned with the vision of top management.

We also recommend maintaining training and development as part of an organization's strategy due to the significant positive impact on employee performance, productivity, creativity, and innovation. Lastly, we recommend that in the future, more studies should be conducted in order to compare the MEA region with other regions such as North America, Europe, and South Asia, just for example.

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