

Research Idea

Workforce Diversity in Public Sector: A Case Study of Iran

Niloufar Safdarianghomsheh²

Abstract: Diversity is considered a salient issue in human resource management. Workforce diversity embraces any types of dissimilarities in terms of culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, beliefs and expectations that differentiates each member of the organization from another. The ability to understand the specific expectations and diverse perspectives of the workforce provides managers with goal achievement, creating competitive advantage and resolving conflicts in the organization. This paper aims to identify the problems and conflicts that can arise due to the diversity in Iranian administrative organizations. In order to acquire data in line with the purpose of research, managers of two multicultural administrative organizations were invited to a semi-structured interview and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results are presented in form of multicultural human resources pathology model and solutions for reducing conflicts and the mentioned problems are presented.

² Ph.D. Candidate, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran, Safdarian.n@gmail.com

Introduction

The issues surrounding the nature and impact of diversity –and especially ethnic and social diversity– have attracted growing interest in many countries (Boston and Callister, 2005). As for the definition of workforce diversity, in fact, there is no single or orthodox idea concerning its meaning (Carrell and Mann, 1995). In the context of employment issues, workforce diversity is typically discussed in reference to the benefits of variety in workforce attributes (Jackson, Stone and Alvarez, 1993; Schneider and Northcraft, 1999).

Workforce diversity has, indeed, become an imperative for organizational competitiveness and effectiveness (Cox, 1993; Gentile, 1996; Jackson and Schuler, 2000) and diversity management is increasingly becoming a principle of human resource management (Mathews, 1998). Diversity Management (DM) is a managerial approach that emphasizes variety in the workplace as one of the indicators of higher work efficiency (Keil et al., 2007). Valuing diversity means more than labeling women, immigrants, and minorities as different from the majority and attempting to assimilate them into the organizational culture or corporate world (Ewoh, 2013). Adopting and implementing diversity in organizations is seen as a way to help organizations achieve their objectives, especially in serving the diverse public.

DM has become one of the critical aspects of public sector reforms in recent times because of population dynamics and demographic shifts in society. The idea has become more relevant in multicultural societies with people with different ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds (Ohemeng and McGrandle, 2014). Diversity poses tough challenges for managers in both public and private organizations (Ospina, 2001).

Another incentive to promote diversity in public organizations is rooted in the public

administration values of responsiveness and representation in democratic societies (Ospina and Wagner, 2001). Indeed, public agencies must strive to represent a wide variety of citizens, as well as to consider the plurality of values, concerns and voices of the larger population. Striving for a socially diverse workforce will help attain this mandate. Anything short of that would reduce trust and legitimacy in the eyes of both local officials and the public (Ospina, 2001). A representative public sector workforce also sends a strong message of inclusion, that public sector institutions are serious about taking all of their citizens' concerns to heart and designing policies and programs that meet their needs (OECD, 2015). In general, the theory of representative bureaucracy holds that passive representation – whereby an agency's workforce reflects the demographics of the clients or citizens it serves – helps ensure active representation – whereby bureaucrats respond to the needs and interests of their social counterparts are the general population (Ricucci and Van Ryzin, 2015). Several studies have indicated that passive representation leads to diversity gains and can enfranchise various social groups (Kellough, 1990; Kellough and Elliott, 1992; Meier, 1993b; Ricucci and Saidel, 1997; Selden, 1997). Diversity is also a central policy goal in achieving democracy (McCann, 2013).

To illustrate, other things being equal, a more diverse society will mean a wider variety of preferences, needs and aspirations. In short, certain types of diversity, and in particular changes in the nature or degree of diversity, may create political pressures for government intervention (Boston and Callister, 2005). Furthermore, diversity is considered as one of the most important obstacles to the implementation of public policy (Rangriz et al., 2018).

Considering the importance of workforce diversity in public sector organizations, the following

research investigates the problems regarding multicultural workforce in public and semi-public¹ organizations of Iran³. Suggestions to overcome the problems are also presented by the managers, based on their personal experiences confronting the matter, which mention the key role of public policy making in reducing the conflicts.

The Case Study: Pathology of Multicultural HR in Iranian Administrative Organizations

Iran is a vast land and a collection of various cultures, with different languages and even dialects. In organizations made up of dissimilar individuals and members from different cultures, managing this diversity is a difficult and sensitive task. Culture, as a way of perceiving human beings and their set of shared beliefs and values that influence people's behavior, thinking, and attitudes toward organizational goals, can serve as a starting point for movement and/or impediment to progress and organizational conflicts. In this study, gender, culture, religious beliefs and ethnicity, in the sense of subculture, were considered as a multicultural context.

Concerning such diversity in workforce, the perceived need to study HR led the researcher to invite managers at three levels of CEO, executive and senior experts from the two ministries of Petroleum and Energy –which are considered multicultural in terms of staff composition– to an interview. The managers were composed of both females and males with a managerial background of ten to fifteen years, who possessed masters and doctoral degrees. The senior experts with average tenure of 25 years, mainly heading the staff unit,

³ Semi-public means the domination of government, government-affiliated organizations or government entities over factories and large corporations in general that have been privatized.

were also assumed to be at the level of managers in terms of work experience.

In this semi-structured interview, non-probability purposive sampling was selected for the qualitative research including the questions with the main focus on investigating the major problems and conflicts that multiculturalism of human resources can cause for different aspects of HRM functions, varying from employment to compensation. Out of thirty completed questionnaires, 21 were considered acceptable⁴ and used for extracting the basic themes.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. In this method, the data is analyzed in three stages: the formulation of basic themes, constructive or organizing themes and compilation of general themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After reviewing the contexts of interviews, the coding process began. Meaningful propositions were identified, considered as a basic theme and a specific code was assigned to each topic. For instance, statements such as "In our company, like in any other organizations, there exists dissent within women's empowerment due to cultural and religious beliefs. Thereupon; women are less likely than men to be promoted to CEO positions". A basic theme is considered the existence of "under-utilization of women's potential in management" with the code P11-2 being assigned to. Data analysis in the coding process led to the emergence of 32 basic themes, eight themes of the synthesis and with the aggregate of constructive themes, there appeared three final and general themes⁵.

⁴ Nine questionnaires were considered distorted due to non-compliance of the answers with the subject and were removed from the coding process.

⁵ For the purpose of achieving validity/credibility, techniques such as well-documented audit trail of materials and processes, multidimensional analysis, respondent verification, constant data comparison and the use of tables were applied.

Results show that multicultural human resources can lead to problems and conflicts in the organization, which are presented in form of multicultural human resources pathology model. According to the findings (see Table 1 in Appendix), solutions for reducing conflicts and the mentioned problems were presented.

Some of the most important solutions presented are as follows (Safdarianghomsheh, 2018):

1. Observing justice and equality in government budgeting (i.e. equal distribution of facilities and social welfare in the provinces of the country will lead to educational development and thus cultural enrichment). In addition to benefiting from targeted education systems and enriching personal and social communication skills, this helps employees to enhance job well-being and security, which is critical to job satisfaction, creativity and innovation in human resources;
2. Localization of managers and employees;
3. Engagement of all ethnicities and religions at different organizational levels as well as the recruitment of international staff whenever possible;
4. Staff participation in decision making;
5. Targeted education and training;
6. Appointing women to key organizational positions
7. Heeding the importance of long-term planning;
8. Designing a payroll system with the participation of employees;
9. Transparent expression of changes and its purpose for employees;
10. Understanding and valuing employee differences.

Conclusion

In recent decades, there has been much talk of productivity and performance in the public sector. Human resources experts believe that diversity leads to competitive advantage. Workforce migration is the movement of cultures, beliefs, and practices of understanding, away from the behavioral and intellectual communities in which they were developed. If human resources and, on a larger scale, governments can utilize this diverse pool of talent and creativity, organizations will flourish, and consequently, communities. By introducing diversity into the public sector, the bureaucracy principle will be observed in reality, as people will find people like themselves serving them when referring to the public sector organizations.

Previous studies (e.g. Luthar and Luthar, 2007; Tunga and Baumann, 2009; Nathan and Lee, 2013; Nederveen et al., 2013; Minelgaite Snaebjornsson et al., 2015; Tenhiälä et al., 2016; and etc.) have examined the role of culture in shaping the preferences and behaviors on an international scale.

This study was conducted in Iran for the first time and sought to integrate, while validating other relevant investigations with a more comprehensive view, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and key characteristics of organizational culture. Throughout the research process, it confirms the importance of diversity in decision-making approaches of individuals, values, expectations, financial behaviors, the effects of a diverse workforce on productivity and reaffirms the fact that, contrary to popular and economic beliefs, monetary incentives are not the only aspect that employees care about.

Furthermore, this paper highlights a set of problems and conflicts that arise from a diverse

workforce, which can be considered as a sample of what consequences can follow if this diversity is ignored.

It is suggested that future comparative studies be conducted in different geographical areas and with the involvement of LGBT statistical populations in order to discover the other disadvantages and problems that may be experienced by multicultural HR in organizations. The focus of other related studies on this topic may be to provide practical solutions to reduce and minimize the negative effects of such conflicts, and to turn threats into opportunities, implement solutions in the organizational environment and provide feedback.

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Appendix

Table 1: Multicultural human resources pathology model

