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Valerie Priscilla Goby Catherine Nickerson Emily David

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Interpersonal communication and diversity climate: promoting workforce localization in the UAE

Valerie Priscilla Goby, Catherine Nickerson and Emily David
College of Business, Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to identify the rudiments of an organizational communication framework which can serve as a facilitator of a positive diversity climate, which, in turn, could enhance the integration of locals into the expatriate-dominated workforce of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). As UAE citizens constitute a small minority of the workforce, the local style of communication is not, ipso facto, the dominant one in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The study elicited 458 Emirati respondents' narratives of positive and negative workplace communication experiences. The authors identified emerging themes to highlight the key features of interpersonal interactions likely to foster or hinder a supportive diversity climate.

Findings – The critical incidents reported are interpreted in terms of UAE cultural traditions, more specifically, the communication patterns valued by local workers.

Research limitations/implications – Outside of the Arabian Gulf, there are perhaps no other national workforces that are so multicultural that local communication strategies are overshadowed. This research is, therefore, a pioneering attempt to re-establish a preference for indigenous communication practices to facilitate the workforce localization policies that are present in many Gulf countries.

Practical implications – The communication preferences identified could inform the implementation of an organizational communication model centered around indigenous communication preferences, including the communication strategies that would be most effective for organizational leadership to use. At the same time, this could contribute to the creation of a positive diversity climate that, in turn, could decrease levels of attrition among Emirati employees and enhance workforce localization.

Originality/value – This study represents an innovative attempt to construct a communication model around which a positive diversity climate can coalesce and, in so doing, it serves as an initial contribution to the management of diversity within the context of Arabian Gulf workplaces.

Keywords United Arab Emirates, Arabian Gulf, Emiratization, Diversity climate, Organizational communication, Workforce localization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent decades, the countries of the Arabian Gulf have established quotas and other policies aimed at encouraging locals to enter the workforce, most especially the private sector. These localization efforts are referred to using their respective country names, for example, Saudization, Omanization, Kuwaitization or Emiratization. These policies are necessary because rapid industrialization encouraged a historical dependence on imported foreign workers of all levels. Despite the fact that decades of high birthrates and increasing educational opportunities have left the region with an abundance of

young, highly educated locals, imported labor continues to dominate, and at the same time, jobs in the long-preferred public sector have reached a saturation point (Government of the UAE, 2009). To encourage more local participation in the private sector, a series of pro-national labor policies have been implemented, most commonly, in the form of the requirement that organizations must hire a minimum ratio of local employees to expatriate employees. These programs, however, have met with varying success across the region, and they have generally failed to meet the expectations of the governments in the Gulf (Al Ali, 2008).

We propose that existing studies on diversity and organizational communication may provide clues on how to remedy this situation. In particular, we look at studies that have suggested that organizations should implement ways to send positive messages that people of all backgrounds are to be considered as valuable assets and, in doing so, contribute to establishing a strong diversity climate. For instance, previous studies have posited that fostering interpersonal competence and communication across cultural lines can contribute to these climate perceptions and to reducing the levels of attrition (Groggins and Ryan, 2013). Aligned with this notion, in the present study, we aim to identify a series of preferred communication practices that can help to attract and retain high-performing local employees and, therefore, to contribute to enhanced localization policies.

Local workers and the Emiratization policy
The oil boom of the 1960s saw the start of an extensive importation of foreign labor to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to assist in the building of the country's infrastructure enabled by oil revenues. At this time, the local population was small in number and lacking in educational and technical qualifications. Since then, however, the Emirati birthrate has soared (Lahmeyer, 2001) and education has been prioritized and heavily financed (Godwin, 2006). Although these practices have resulted in a large and well-qualified local workforce, the preference for importing labor, primarily from low gross domestic product countries, continues. Local workers are disfavored over expatriate workers whose salary expectations are guided by their countries of origin and which, consequently, are typically much lower (Waqas, 2013).

To curb this trend, in the 1990s, the UAE Government implemented a set of policies, termed Emiratization, to encourage the recruitment of local workers (Al Ali, 2008; Forstenlechner, 2008). These efforts were largely focused on the private sector, as locals had been, and continue to be, traditionally employed in the government sector. The primary goal of this plan was to engage locals in the workplace to ensure both adequate employment opportunities for them as well as to reduce the historic reliance on expatriate labor. Emiratization policies recognize the need to place local workers at the heart of the workforce and decision-making to ensure the endogenous social and economic development of the country (Goby, 2014).

Despite being in place for several decades, however, localization policies in the UAE have had little success in practice (Forstenlechner, 2010). Locals hold a meager 0.5 per cent of private sector jobs and 60 per cent of public sector jobs; government figures put unemployment among Emiratis at 40,000 or 15 per cent (Salem and Dajani, 2013), although figures as high as 28 per cent have also been cited (Trenwith, 2013). Several reasons for this failure have been proposed including, notably, the poor social integration of local employees within a workplace dominated by expatriates. Emiratis

typically find that they constitute a numerical and cultural minority when working in organizations in their own country (Goby, 2014). Indeed, studies have documented the negative attitudes of expatriates to local workers, as well as cases of the exclusion of local workers by expatriate workers and the struggle experienced by local workers to find professional fulfillment within such environments (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2010, 2012). Given these findings and observations, it seems plausible that the creation of a diversity climate within UAE organizations that is perceived as positive by employees of all backgrounds would help to bring about a reduction in the levels of attrition within the local workforce and would, therefore, facilitate the process of localization. In the following section, we summarize the construct of diversity climate and theorize how this facet of organizational culture may be cultivated by encouraging indigenous communication norms and lead to more successful Emiratization initiatives.

Diversity climate as a tool for localization

Diversity climate refers to the perception employees have of their organization's commitment to recruiting and celebrating people with different backgrounds (McKay *et al.*, 2008). Several environmental factors contribute to these perceptions including the existence of fair human resource management practices and routines, workforce demographic heterogeneity and diversity-conscious hiring practices (Avery and McKay, 2006; Barak *et al.*, 1998; Kossek *et al.*, 2003). Strong diversity climates imply that the employees believe that they will be treated fairly regardless of their differences, whether surface-level, such as demographic, or deep-level, such as personality, differences (Kossek and Zonia, 1993). In the context of the USA, for instance, positive outcomes of diversity climate include lower employee turnover rates (McKay *et al.*, 2007), higher customer satisfaction (McKay *et al.*, 2011) and better job performance (McKay *et al.*, 2009).

Most importantly, for the present study, a strong diversity climate can shape the way employees perceive and communicate with one another and influence the way in which they behave (Hobman *et al.*, 2004; O'Reilly and Chatman, 1996; Schaubrock and Lam, 2002). For instance, Emiratis may choose to respond to what they perceive to be a supportive environment with heightened performance and lower turnover. Similarly, in such an environment, expatriate and local coworkers could co-construct an environment composed of clear communication practices and fair policies, which would support the local employees and give them access to the resources they need. In this way, it is possible that the establishment of a diversity climate perceived as positive by all employees, as a result of appropriate communication and other workplace practices would also have a positive influence on the effectiveness of a localization policy.

Research on Gulf localization suggests that factors indicative of a supportive diversity climate are necessary if government quota programs are to be successful. For example, some researchers have pointed to the stereotyping of locals in an expatriate-heavy society as one barrier to the widespread employment of Emiratis in the private sector (Forstenlechner *et al.*, 2012). Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner (2010) found, for instance, that expatriates generally harbored negative attitudes related to UAE citizens' competencies, work ethic and cultural disposition, as well as to the perceived effectiveness of the localization policy. More disturbingly, they also found that some of these stereotypes were internalized by the UAE citizens themselves (Abdalla *et al.*, 2010; Forstenlechner, 2010). We are arguing here that organizations that truly want to employ

and retain high-quality local employees should invest resources in the first instance to create a positive diversity climate. However, Herdman and McMillan-Capehart (2010) have also shown, on the basis of empirical evidence, that the existence of a diversity program alone is not enough to create perceptions of a strong diversity climate. Their study illustrates that the values managers communicate play a crucial role in whether employees think that the company is serious about its inclusion efforts. Research in the UAE context has found that, indeed, managers tend to hold negative views on the viability of including local workers in the private sector and that:

> […] those at the very top of organizations, the well informed and the decision makers are even stronger in their stereotyping of citizens than those further down the corporate ladder, independent of whether they are expatriates or citizens themselves (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2010, p. 377).

Given that simply hiring a diverse group is insufficient, more research is needed to identify other mechanisms that are instrumental in creating a positive diversity climate. A recent study by Groggins and Ryan (2013) attempted to outline ways that organizations can communicate these principles. Among the methods they recommend is the championing of the credo "respecting difference is a necessity not a nicety, which translates into openness to others and the development of interpersonal competence" (Groggins and Ryan, 2013, p. 272). The authors note that encouraging interpersonal norms of respect, inclusion and mutual understanding while communicating across cultural and language barriers is essential in harnessing the benefits associated with a strong diversity climate.

In the present study, our aim is to deconstruct the interpersonal communication that takes place in the workplace as perceived by UAE nationals to understand more about how social interaction preferences can be used to influence the creation of a positive – or, indeed, negative – diversity climate. Although intergroup conflict in general, and the quality of the intergroup communication in particular, has been referred to in the conceptual accounts of diversity climate given by scholars such as Cox (1993), Bell (2011) and Goyal and Shrivastava (2013), interpersonal interactions have yet to be investigated empirically as a group-level component with an influence on diversity climate.

Contributions

The first contribution of this study is that it may potentially confirm how one of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to diversity climate generalizes to the UAE and the Gulf as a whole. Although diversity climate has been studied extensively in recent years in the USA and other Western countries, the authors have found no studies that have examined how this construct obtains in different cultural settings. To address this shortcoming in the literature, we aim to show how one contributing factor of a diversity climate, namely, workplace communication, is exemplified in the UAE's unique cultural context. Second, this study may identify the communication strategies that are needed to ensure that Emirati recruits can thrive within the workplace environment, including how they may gain access to crucial resources such as work-related information, assistance in clarifying doubts and help in solving problems. Third, we aim to help bridge science and practice with regard to building positive diversity climates. Although several empirical studies have shown that these climates have an impact on important outcomes, comparatively little is known about how to increase such climate

perceptions (Guillaume *et al.*, 2013). As such, we hope to identify the communication strategies that are uniquely suited to building UAE-specific diversity climates as part of an organizational communication framework. Finally, this study aims to answer a recent call for a closer examination of diversity research and policies in the Western world that may offer "lessons learned" to identify possible policies which may encourage organizational excellence with regard to localization efforts in the Middle East (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2010).

Methods

In the contexts typically investigated by scholars, that is, Western countries, the dominant communication model for the workplace is usually determined by the host country's culture and the communication strategies that are preferred by the people who belong to that culture. In the case of the UAE, no such hegemonic or dominant communication model exists; however, inasmuch as the communication choices emerging from the cultural mix of more than 200 nationalities that make up the workforce both supersede and are not always the same as local communication preferences. Given this lack of clarity in what an appropriate model of workplace communication would be within an Emirati workplace, our study seeks to investigate the nature of the communication strategies that are preferred by local workers, as it seems likely that these preferred strategies are most likely to facilitate the effective engagement of UAE locals within the workforce and, consequently, the creation of a diversity climate that they perceive as positive. In the discussion below, we outline our research question and instrument, the population sample we drew on, the way in which we analyzed our data and findings.

Research question

Our research question was as follows:

> *RQ1.* What are the communication strategies preferred by UAE nationals that can contribute to the creation of a positive diversity climate?

Research instrument

To serve as a preliminary investigative tool, we designed a short questionnaire in which we asked respondents to briefly narrate critical incidents of both a positive and a negative nature relating to their communication experiences within the workplace. The open-ended nature of this approach was preferred to elicit any kind of event respondents had been affected by in the course of their work. The prompts to the narration of critical incidents were not specific other than referring to issues relating to workplace communication; they were intended to help elucidate the dysfunctional communication behaviors which impact negatively on workplace engagement and to identify the constituent factors of communication strategies which can enhance engagement and, consequently, performance.

Population sample

Our sample consisted of 458 Emirati respondents working in both the private and public sectors. It included 282 female and 171 male respondents (61.6 and 37.3 per cent, respectively), divided over three different age groups: 67.9 per cent in the age group of 18-29 years ($n = 311$), 23.4 per cent in the age group of 30-44 years ($n = 117$) and

7.4 per cent in the age group of 45+ years (n = 34), with demographic information incomplete in five questionnaires. This meant that the sample was relatively young, but this replicates the youthful population of Dubai of which those aged 20-30 years represent the largest age group and only 11.48 per cent is aged 46 years or above (Dubai Statistics Centre, 2011). The higher number of female respondents reflects the reality that more females than males graduate in Dubai, and females are becoming increasingly active in the workforce, as a consequence. Likewise, in terms of education level, almost all of our respondents (96.1 per cent, n = 440) had at least completed a high school education, and 74.9 per cent of them (n = 343) had completed tertiary education. This again is representative of recent changes in UAE society such that large numbers of the local community now attend either technical college or university before entering the workforce. Within our sample, 31.9 per cent reported that they were employed in the private sector. However, as mentioned above, the total private sector workforce has only 0.5 per cent Emiratis, so our sample could not be considered representative of the general population. It did, however, mean that our study included the experience of people already working in the private sector, a possibly rich source of feedback, given the target of localization. Although we are aware that sector, age and gender can influence attitudes and experiences within the workplace, given the preliminary nature of our study and our focus on the communication strategies preferred by all UAE nationals, we did not differentiate the responses we received across these different variables.

Data collection
Our questionnaire was administered by local research assistants who were bilingual in English and Arabic. Although our questionnaire was designed in English, we were aware that some respondents might prefer to respond to a local in Arabic, so the data collectors were instructed that they could conduct a mini interview and report in English the critical incidents narrated even if the interview were conducted in Arabic. In this way, a convenience sample of 458 complete responses was gathered with some respondents providing more than one critical incident. We opted for a narration of personal experiences of Emirati citizens only, given Pelled's (1996) finding that group-level interactions are more significant in the functioning of heterogeneous groups than individual characteristics. Accordingly, it seemed important to identify the precursors to group-level interactions that we assumed would be influenced by Emirati cultural traits.

Data analysis
We adopted a qualitative grounded theory approach to analyzing our findings, as Groggins and Ryan (2013) demonstrated this to be an effective approach in identifying the mechanisms underlying a diversity climate. To do this, we studied the critical incidents narrated by respondents and then categorized these under a set of overarching themes that emerged in the responses. These categories were self-generating, and to accurately report the import of each response, we generated a large number of categories. The responses were independently coded by two of the researchers involved in the project, and these were then compared. In this way, we aimed to minimize the interpretation bias that could be inherent in a qualitative study of this nature.

Findings
Five major categories emerged from the positive and negative incidents reported, and we also retained several sub-categories within each of these to ensure faithful reporting of responses. The following tables overview the positive and dysfunctional (Table I) features of communication, as indicated by our Emirati respondents.

Discussion
The high frequency of critical incidents relating to a shared language and the presence (Category 1; No. 95) or absence of this (Category 8; No. 136) no doubt derives from the fact that the UAE does not have the same feature of monolingualism that pertains, for example, in the USA. That is, although Arabic is the official language of the country and the language of government, English is the accepted lingua franca of education and business (Nickerson and Crawford-Camiciottoli, 2013). In addition, several other languages have dominated in certain sectors, such as Urdu in the construction industry. There is no minimum language requirement for immigration purposes as exists, for example, in the USA, and many immigrant workers have little or no knowledge of either Arabic or English. While an adequate knowledge of English is typically possessed by higher-level private sector employees, it is not necessarily a requirement among lower-level workers. Hence, the management of language diversity, identified by López-Duarte and Vidal-Suarez (2010) as of vital importance in our globalizing world, is more keenly felt within the enormous nationality mix present in the UAE and other fast-developing Gulf economies. Although empirical work by scholars such as Charles and Marschan-Piekkari (2002) and Welch *et al.* (2005) in multinational settings would suggest caution in simply adopting English as a corporate language without taking linguistic or cultural differences into account, other work, such as that by Chudoba and Maznevski (2000) and, most recently, Lauring and Selmer (2012), demonstrates the importance of a shared corporate language in fostering mutual understanding and creating a positive diversity climate. There is a growing awareness that many expatriate workers in the UAE do not have sufficient job responsibilities (Salem and Dajani, 2013) and that greater control over the skills of foreign hires should be implemented. We argue that language ability should be an area of particular focus, given the current opinion that only higher-level workers need English or Arabic, whereas in reality, even low-level workers need adequate communication skills. This obstacle is partially reflected in the complaint about peers and subordinates not doing their job properly (Categories 9a and 9b; No. 48 and No. 15, respectively), as it is possible that employees simply do not know what is required of them because of the lack of a common language for explanation and feedback. Our contention is that an essential component of an effective communication framework must be that all parties should be able to demonstrate adequate language skills.

The second most frequently cited factor was that of a friendly, respectful work environment (Category 2; No. 106). The UAE is characterized by a high-context culture in which smooth interactions are prized (Goby, 2009), and this is reflected in the high value our respondents accorded to respectful, polite interactions. Significantly, 33 respondents stated that they had no experience of a negative incident to report, and one of these stated: "None; but if I had, I wouldn't say. It's no good to talk about such things". Clearly, on the basis of the same behavioral norm, inappropriate emotional displays (Category 11a; No. 34), rudeness (Category 11b; No. 29) and displays of pride

Category	Type of incident narrated	No. of respondents who narrated such an incident
Positive critical incidents		
1	*Communication/language-related issues*	95
1a	Clarity of pronunciation and word meaning among co-workers	52
1b	Adequate language skills (knowing English/Arabic adequately and knowledge of other languages, e.g. Urdu, Hindi)	22
1c	Arabic-speaking co-workers/clients	21
2	*Supportive organizational environment*	106
2a	Work environment characterized by friendliness, respect, politeness	48
2b	Opportunities/facility to give or receive help to/from colleagues	45
2c	Being able to make co-workers/clients happy	7
2d	Patience and tolerance	4
2e	Being smiled at	2
3	*Work performance*	82
3a	Successful team work	23
3b	Being able to execute task well/solve problems	23
3c	Ability of co-workers to do their job well	10
3d	Successful negotiation experiences	11
3e	Successful meetings	9
3f	Adequate education of co-workers	2
3g	Successful persuasion events	2
3h	Suitable assignment of duties	1
3i	Motivated co-workers	1
4	*Opportunities to improve and create*	79
4a	Learning from co-workers	33
4b	Being able to give feedback and innovate	17
4c	Being able to learn from co-workers of different nationalities	14
4d	Good on-the-job/external training	8
4e	Having European/American colleagues to learn from and as a source of cultural enrichment	7
5	*Supportive management*	65
5a	Appreciation/recognition from boss	21
5b	Good listening skills of boss	12
5c	Feedback/advice from boss	11
5d	Clear instructions from boss	11
5e	Material support from boss (such as time off when needed)	7
5f	Egalitarian boss	2
5g	Friendly boss	1
6	*National identity*	35
6a	Having Emirati co-workers	34
6b	Being able to serve the country	1
		(*continued*)

Table I.
Themes from
positive and negative
critical incidents

Category	Type of incident narrated	No. of respondents who narrated such an incident
7	*Other*	14
7a	Open-mindedness	1
7b	Humor	1
7c	Honesty	1
7d	Satisfactory pay	1
7e	No positive incident to report	6
7f	Getting needed information (auditor)	1
7g	Trust	1
7h	Displays of gratitude	1
7i	Young co-workers	1
Negative critical incidents		
8	*Language- and communication-related factors*	136
8a	Language: lack of common language/unintelligible accent	72
8b	Communication strategy: choice of channel, poor audience analysis, inadequate information or clarity, inappropriate interactional style	38
8c	Refusal to engage (changing topic)	9
8d	Indirect communication style resulting in lack of clarity	8
8e	Refusal to engage in English (of Europeans)	4
8f	Inability to explain mistakes	3
8g	Difficulty in communicating negative messages	2
9	*Performance-related*	86
9a	Inadequate work performance by peers (including from other companies, e.g. suppliers)	48
9b	Refusal/inability of subordinates to follow instructions	15
9c	Poor professional behavior (chatting during work time, leaving early)	12
9d	Unsuitable assignment of duties	6
9e	Differing job types	5
10	*Unsupportive organizational culture*	77
10a	Exclusion of Emiratis by expatriate workers	19
10b	Others claiming one's work as their own	18
10c	Difficult boss (demanding/unsympathetic/uncommunicative)	17
10d	Refusal to share information	15
10e	Lack of recognition/reward	5
10f	Careerism of co-workers	2
10g	Jealousy of co-workers	1
11	*Interpersonal characteristics*	86
11a	Inappropriate emotional displays	34
11b	Rudeness	29
11c	Displays of pride	11
11d	Close-mindedness	7
11e	Lying	5

Table I.

Category	Type of incident narrated	No. of respondents who narrated such an incident
12	*Prejudices*	25
12a	Stereotyping	9
12b	Anti-feminism	4
12c	Cronyism	4
12d	Ageism	4
12e	Educational difference	2
13	*Other*	52
13a	No negative incident to report	33
13b	Differing attitudes to time	10
13c	Cultural differences	9

Table I.

(Category 11c; No. 11) feature in respondents' narratives as responsible for negative interactions. Tolerance is value highly prized in the UAE and stems from Islamic teachings (Kurtz, 2005). The importance of this virtue is reflected in the emerging themes of prejudice (Category 12; No. 25), close-mindedness (Category 11d; No. 7), open-mindedness (Category 7a; No. 1) and patience and tolerance (Category 2d; No. 4).

This finding has interesting implications with respect to the building of a strong diversity climate in the UAE cultural context. Although in low-context cultures (e.g. Germany), in which direct communication is preferred, tolerance and inclusion might be explored by talking about problems and pointing out differences to enhance understanding, such a strategy could be perceived as rude by Emirati standards. Arabian Gulf citizens have a cultural preference for indirect communication, most especially in the case of negative or sensitive subjects, and they prize highly the concept of "saving face" (Klopf, 1995). Given this, a strategy better suited to encouraging diversity climate in the UAE would be promoting the use of positive language and encouraging celebratory events for high-performing employees while, at the same time, encouraging employees to politely ignore minor blunders made by others. Understanding such cultural nuances is important from a practical standpoint when attempting to build a strong diversity climate.

A related implication of this study is that the concept of diversity climate may mean something different in the UAE from what it means in Western contexts. A consistent theme across the responses was a preference for uniformity in communication language and education levels. This implies that true diversity in terms of the number of people from different backgrounds may not be enough to create positive diversity climate perceptions. Indeed, Alserhan et al. (2010) found that, despite their predictions, neither employing more nationals nor having more nationalities, religions or languages in the UAE workplace impacted employee attitudes toward diversity. In fact, most of the employees sampled had similar and neutral attitudes toward diversity regardless of the composition of the workforce (Alserhan et al., 2010). This differs from studies in the USA that show that organizational and workgroup heterogeneity can help foster a strong diversity climate (Kossek et al., 2003). There were some similarities, however, with the Western conceptualization of diversity climate. In particular, various types of unfair treatment and prejudice (e.g. anti-feminism [Category 12b; No. 4], cronyism [Category 12c; No. 4] and ageism [Category 12d; No. 4]) were listed among the negative

critical incidents. This implies that fair treatment regardless of differences is perceived as a universal component in a positive diversity climate.

The UAE is a collectivist society (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010), in which mutual support has high priority and the imperative to assist others is further supported by the code of loyalty and honor highly prized in Gulf cultures (Hickson and Pugh, 1995). The enduring sanctity of such joint support is evidenced by the frequency of incidents concerning the giving/receiving of help (Category 2b; No. 45), assisting others to learn (Category 4a; No. 33), making others happy (Category 2c; No. 7) and narratives relating to the refusal to share information as a deterrent (Category 10d; No. 15).

A robust top-down structure of authority is traditional in the Middle East in general, and this generates a sense of the dominant role of management (Kasseem and Habib, 1998). This would account for the high number of incidents focusing on the value of supportive management (Category 5; No. 65) and lamenting the lack of such (Category 10c; No. 17), as, given this cultural norm, firm support from higher up the hierarchy is expected.

Emiratis are keenly aware of the need to develop the country and of their minority position within the workforce, and they have traditionally conceived of work as their contribution to building up their community (Al Khan, 2012). However, they have also been subject to a considerable degree of alienation within the workplace (Goby, 2014), and this makes them conscious of their different status *vis-à-vis* their expatriate colleagues as indicated in the positive value ascribed to having Emirati co-workers (Category 6a; No. 34) and criticism of expatriate workers' exclusion of Emiratis (Category 10a; No. 19). We call for future research to directly compare the communication habits and preferences of Emirati and expatriate workers in Dubai to further understand how a common ground may emerge. In addition, it would be interesting to determine whether communication preferences (and diversity climate perceptions) are significantly different between Emiratis working in private and public sectors.

Conclusion

Our study indicates that certain key features of traditional Emirati behavioral norms and cultural trends figure strongly in locals' preferences for workplace interactions, and these need to be integrated into communication within the workplace. An awareness of these issues is crucial, given the evidence that, despite being adequately qualified, Emiratis often fail to engage well in the workplace dominated by expatriates. Raising employee awareness of the communication strategies that are familiar and culturally acceptable to Emirati citizens would be the first step in enabling them to operate meaningfully and with ease within a workforce that is likely to remain dominated by expatriates for some time to come. We further propose that organizational efforts to accommodate such communication norms would signal a UAE-specific positive diversity climate and may help to ensure greater success in local attraction and retention efforts.

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Corresponding author
Valerie Priscilla Goby can be contacted at: valeriegoby@gmail.com

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