The Direction of Change Management in United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the current change management literature that exists on the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and then explore the extent to which this literature has responded to the calls for more research in this field. A general and broad search of the literature on change management was made and peer-reviewed articles selected, preferably about the UAE. The findings were then analyzed and a discussion of the literature formed. The aim was to gain some understanding on the direction of change management in the UAE in order to guide future research about change management and to stimulate interest in the topic. The findings show that there is a problem regarding the lack of a research papers on change management in the UAE and the implications for government and business, and decision makers.

1. Introduction

From an employee perspective, the changes that multinational corporations are considering appear to be complex, hard, unnecessary, and at times unclear. They often require employees to learn new concepts, behaviors, attitudes, and skills, some of which the employees do not understand, or, even if the changes are understood, in many cases the employees do not agree with them. Many experts tell organizations to use tougher modes of persuasion when resistance is met in order to execute change programs successfully (Woodall, 1996; Ford et al., 2008; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Moormann (2001) suggests that major organizational changes, to the structure, policies, and practices of an organization, might have a critical impact on employees, and as a result affect their responses to the changes. Therefore, organizations must apply change management practices effectively in order to survive employee adaptation to the changes.

The future direction of change management practices in the Arab world is uncertain, including that of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Despite the changes that have happened in different sectors across the UAE (Wagie, 2006), there are very limited attempts to understand change management and its motivations. In addition, there is no clear conception of what influences change management within UAE organizations, although it is recognized that the UAE is an Islamic country and that this culture might affect organizational change management.

Today, the UAE is an open economy that welcomes international trade and competition, including with its neighboring Gulf countries. The UAE, therefore, needs to continuously address organizational direction, structures, and capabilities in order to maintain a competitive advantage. Notably, there are calls in the UAE to encourage academics, practitioners, and researchers to undertake further research on change management (Alameri, 2013; Bin Taher et al., 2015).

This paper presents a review of the current change management literature that exists on the UAE and then sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has responded to the calls for more research in this field. Also, it sets out to explore the extent to which this literature has shown the direction of change management in the UAE. Furthermore, it explores the contextual challenges that could face experts in this field when trying to implement changes within their organizations, given the UAE's under-representation within the overall change literature. We seek to answer the following questions:

1.   How has change management in the UAE been studied in recent past years?

2.   What gaps exist in the literature that might form the foundation for future research on change management in the UAE?

2. Perspectives on Change Management

Organizational change has been defined by Todnem (2005) as continuously renewing an organization, while Gilley et al. (2009) identify organizational change as the most effective way to improve the current state of an organization. There is no doubt about the importance of change initiatives to an organization's future.

Compelling evidence from a study by Hudescu and Ilies (2011) shows that change management remains difficult to maintain and implement for several reasons. First, the literature about change regularly forms a barrier to a broader appreciation of the basic principles surrounding the change process. Second, change management concepts and application require knowledge of organizational systems and information from different areas, such as finance and accounting, or from individuals and groups. Third, change management affects various traditional functional areas, such as management, marketing, and, most currently, strategic management. Fourth, the overwhelming number of approaches to change management leaves organizational leaders confused and often too short of time and resources to assess the existing state of affairs (Hudescu & Ilies, 2011).

Change management is not a ready-made recipe that anyone can adopt and make all concerns disappear. It is rather a type of management domination that, through the implementation of systematic management interventions, allows individuals to adapt to the required situation and its outcomes, which are aligned with an organization's strategy (Rees & French, 2013). Moreover, "change management" has two meanings. First, it is about making changes in a planned and systematic way, and, second, it is about managing how employees react to the changes, even in unstable environments when the company does not have much control over certain aspects of those changes (Garg & Singh, 2006).

3. Methods

The research commenced with a general and broad search of the literature on change management. We selected peer-reviewed articles, preferably about the UAE. To identify the articles, we used the multiple databases at the Abu Dhabi University library and Google Scholar. These searches resulted in 15 articles focusing on change management in the UAE. The findings were then analyzed and a discussion of the literature formed.

To find what we were looking for, we used the following keywords to find articles: "change management", "managing change", and "organizational change". These keywords were used in combination with the following keywords: "United Arab Emirates", "UAE", and "UAE organization". In this way, we ensured that the change issues were related to the UAE context only. Next, the list of articles was examined and errors were corrected, such as removing double entries and articles that, upon closer inspection, did not analyze change management in the UAE or did not meet other formal requirements (period, journal, language, or region). After the completion of this process, 15 papers remained and were reviewed in detail. The review consisted of a summary and classification of the data. Next, general and content-based information was retrieved from the articles to assist in the classification of the data. Classification included author, year of publication, and journal. In addition, a summary of the article was written, highlighting its insights and relevance to the review.

4. Descriptive

Thirteen out of the 15 articles were peer-reviewed articles, six in international journals; and the remaining two were dissertation studies published by the British University in Dubai (see Table 1).

Table 1. Management sectors covered

Sector/Organization	Count	Percentage
Education Sector	4	26.7
Public Sector	2	13.3
Law Force Sector	1	6.7
Manufacturing Sector	2	13.3
Information Technology	1	6.7
Other	5	33.3
Overall/ Total	15	100

The research methods employed in the articles were analysed (see Table 2). Some articles were conceptual, proposing theoretical frames for the study of change management. Many articles were case studies, often providing descriptions regarding changes in an organization. Other studies were predominantly based on interviews. Many of these studies used questionnaires or secondary (survey) data analyses. Furthermore, of all

15 articles included in the review, four were specified in the education sector, which represents 26.7%.

4.1 Change Management in the UAE

Literature about organizational change in the Arab world is rare (Al-Blori, 2005), and especially so in the UAE even though significant progress has been made in economic and technological development in recent years (Alameri, 2013). This study seeks to summarize a group of studies that focus on change management in the UAE region (see Table 2).

Table 2. Review of change management literature in the UAE

Authors	Objective(s)	Research methods	Place	Conclusion/Findings
Yousef (2000a)	This paper investigates the role of different aspects of organizational commitment and job satisfaction in forecasting different attitudes toward organizational change	Research study	30 organizations from the UAE	The study concludes that certain dimensions of organizational commitment directly influence certain attitudes towards organizational change
Yousef (2000b)	Organizational commitment as mediator in the relationship between the Islamic work ethic (IWE) and attitudes towards organizational change are discussed	Research study	30 organizations from the UAE	The results conclude that IWE directly positively influences various dimensions both of attitudes towards organizational change and the levels of organizational commitment
Yousef (2000c)	This study investigates the joint effects of both role conflict and role ambiguity on job satisfaction, and three dimensions of attitudes towards organizational change	Research study	Five manufacturing companies in the UAE	The results of a moderated regression analysis reveal that role conflict and role ambiguity independently and negatively affect job satisfaction, cognitive attitudes, and behavioral tendency attitudes toward organizational change
Iqbal (2008)	The aim of this research is to examine and improve the effectiveness of the public sector organizations to manage change	Case study	Roads and Traffic Agency (RTA), Dubai, the UAE.	One of the findings of this research indicates the key emerging issues that adversely impact the change approach deployed
Randeree (2008)	This paper examines portal-based education and investigates change management for organizations engaged in transferring from traditional to e-based portal systems	Exploratory study	Educational context in the UAE	The study stresses the importance of change management and the management of resistance. It identifies the challenges to change management and organizational change from a structural and behavioral perspective
Al Hashemi (2009)	This paper's focus is the organizational structure of the company. It discusses the possibilities of controlling both risk and change, aiming to suggest a number of solutions within the organizational restructuring	Four case studies in real-estate	Organizations from the UAE	One of the conclusions reached is the importance of understanding the effect of organizational change on size, and also to compare the history of other incidents in the region
Randeree and Narwani (2009)	The paper provides a theoretical reflection of contextual research studies on the visibility of information communication technology in higher education (HE) in the UAE) and on the applicability of existing training models to facilitate the adoption of such technologies	Conceptual paper	The UAE higher education environment	The paper concludes that there is imperative need for smooth change management in terms of making effective use of educational technology, and provisioning for return on investment produces a demand for effective blackboard user-training
Al-khouri (2010)	The study presents some practical frameworks for managing the delivery of changes that were used collectively in different situations and contributed to the successful implementation of change programs	This study is based on practical framework that exists in literature	Linked to the UAE	Change management models were proposed as well as methods to help management to implement changes in different situations
Tibi and McLeod (2011)	The purpose of the paper is to study and investigate a stratified purposeful sample of faculty members regarding the changes	A qualitative case study	UAE University's College of Education (CEDU)	This study discusses faculty members' perceptions of processes and changes that were successful or difficult, and recommendations are given on how the

	that had been implemented during the previous decade at the UAE University's College of Education (CEDU)		difficult or unsuccessful experiences might have been managed differently. The theoretical implications of this study may be useful to other institutions as they plan their own changes.
Zahi and Adnan (2012)	This paper aims to examine the common practices of change projects in the manufacturing industry in the UAE and the key factors for effective implementation, highlighting the roadblocks to organizational change.	Research study	Manufacturing industry in the UAE	The findings revealed that technology change is the change most practiced by the UAE manufacturing industry, then strategy development, total quality management (TQM) driven change, and software development with less emphasis on cultural change
Alameri (2013)	The aim of the paper is to develop a framework to identify the factors needed to assess employees' level of resistance to technological change within UAE public companies and to use the framework to identify opportunities for improvement in job performance	Case study	Public Organization in the UAE	Technology change has positively impacted on all public sector companies in the UAE. Also, technology development and corporate evolution are the factors that drive technology change
Alasadi and Askary (2014)	The research aim is to analyze the relationship between the role of employees involvement and change success	Research study	College of Business Administration in Abu Dhabi University	The empirical research found that involving employees in the change process can reduce resistance to change and managers need to pay attention to employees' needs when undergoing a change process
Al Harahsheh (2014)	This research paper discusses the relationship between leadership skills, and change management skills	Descriptive approach	Police Science Academy (PSA) in Sharjah Emirate, the UAE	The study indicates that leadership skills have a significant impact on change management skills among PSA officers in Sharjah Emirate, the UAE
Renukapp (2014)	The aim of this paper is to explore how the Abu Dhabi public sector organization is embedding sustainability strategies for improved competitiveness	Case study	Public Sector organization in Abu Dhabi, the UAE	The implementation of change management initiatives to deal with sustainability initiatives is still evolving in the case study organization; therefore, collaboration is required to share the best and worst practices related to change management
Bin Taher, Krotov and Silva (2015)	The aim of this paper is to guide leaders on business process reengineering (BPR) and automation projects in the UAE in public sector context	Conceptual paper	About the UAE	It proposes that leadership and communication are essential for implementing change, especially given the particular cultural conditions of the UAE. Moreover, change should be a continuous process supported by communication

As can be seen from Table 2, research in the area of change management is scattered and is not focused on any particular area, except for the four studies in the education sector. One of the most common findings from these papers regards technology, which plays an important role when implementing change management initiatives. However, the aforementioned studies neglect the direction the government seeks in the public sector, where innovation and creativity could be best served. Renukapp (2014), for example, agrees that there is little information known about how public sector organizations are reacting to change in Abu Dhabi. Only the paper by Bin Taher et al. (2015) suggests a framework for leading change management in the UAE. As the UAE is becoming a country that attracts people who wish to see best practices being applied, it needs more studies that are empirical and differ from those of Western countries (Zahi & Adnan, 2012; Renukapp, 2014).

Recently, the UAE government has emphasized the significance of creativity and innovation in all sectors in the country. The government is currently developing and making major changes across its public sector. What is more, the UAE Government as a whole is dedicated to becoming among the most innovative nations in the world over the next few years (MRCGI & SRI, 2016). UAE government leaders, must stay focus about the up-to-date evolutions in science and technology, both to control and maintain such activity, and to employ the new developments in their own service delivery. Nevertheless, the movement of change is now so fast it can be

challenging for policymakers to keep up. Identifying what process to use in such rapid developments in different sectors is a major challenge not only for UAE but also for other parts of the region (Griffin et al., 2016). Further studies are therefore needed in the areas of change management, and results that are more empirical will be needed in the future.

5. Future Directions for Change Management

The government of the UAE organized a World Government Summit; the global meeting was devoted to shaping the future of governments worldwide (Eggers & Bellman, 2016). The summit recognized the importance of research into change management that incorporated innovation and creativity that could offer solutions to the universal challenges that humanity faces (MRCGI & SRI, 2016). The summit also served as a platform for the exchange of knowledge, at the intersection between government, futurism, technology, and innovation, as well as for thought leadership, and has acted as a networking hub for the experts, pioneers, and policymakers in human development.

Moreover, it was an opportunity to display best practices, smart solutions, and innovations to inspire creativity to handle future challenges (Griffin et al., 2016; MRCGI & SRI, 2016). By bringing together the latest and future trends in government for an international audience, the summit was able to highlight the innovations that deserve broader notice. Apparently, some of the innovations are known widely, but most of them have attracted little or no attention. However, all of them address significant social problems and do this in an effectual and novel manner. Hearing about these innovations first hand from experts served to inspire those who attended the summit to consider how the ideas behind the innovations might apply to their work. In particular, it was hoped that by displaying the innovations to governments, and showing how they complement government services, this would inspire creativity in the public and private sectors.

Undoubtedly, governments need to stay well informed about the latest developments in science and technology, in order to control such activities and to use the new developments in the delivery of services (Griffin et al., 2016). However, the rate of change is so rapid that it is hard for policy makers to keep up, and identifying which developments to focus on is a big challenge. For example, there is a problem regarding the lack of research papers on change management in the UAE and the implications of this for government, business, and decision makers.

The need for change within an organization is unpredictable. However, according to Todnem (2005), there seems to be agreement on two important issues regarding change: (1) it is agreed that the pace of change has never been greater than in the current business environment; (2) there is consensus that change is triggered by internal and external factors. In current business practices, it can be seen that many organizations either are thinking about changing their organizational structure or they have already started to change. Kotter and Schlesigner (1989) say there is confirmation of the importance of organizational change, and most companies nowadays find that they must undertake moderate organizational changes at least once a year, and a major one every four or five years.

Following this, the research into the topic of organizational change is diverse. Some of the studies look at organizational change from several perspectives. However, what is missing from the UAE intellectual arena is as suggested by Armenakis and Bedeian (1999). For example, in their review of the theoretical and empirical change literature over recent years, Armenakis and Bedeian identify four research themes or issues common to all change efforts: (1) content issues, which focus on the substance of contemporary organizational changes; (2) contextual issues, which primarily deal with forces in an organization's external and internal environments; (3) process issues, which address actions undertaken during the enactment of an intended change; and (4) criterion issues, which focus on outcomes commonly assessed in organizational change efforts. What has been mentioned here is just to trigger the alarm bell about what is missing in the UAE.

These issues need to be understood and studied. For example, Gelan (2011) states that "organizational change cannot be separated from organizational strategy" (p. 105). Therefore, leaders of an organization need to focus on organizational strategy when making changes. Leaders should generate a trust atmosphere during the time of the changes, since employees will express their need for dynamic, or reactive, planning–that is, on-time decision making, and strong communication from leaders who should be supportive, concerned, and committed to employee welfare (Zahi & Adnan, 2012). Therefore, organizations need leaders who will act positively in helping employees in different situations (Moran & Brightman, 2000). This is not easy to do, and therefore such leaders will need certain skills, or will need to develop skills, in order to implement the change initiatives effectively. Al-Khouri (2010) pointed out that many leaders, whose background skills were technical, financial, or operational, were very competent in their chosen careers; however, when it came to leading people through change, they had little knowledge or lacked the necessary skills.

In addition, one must realize that these aspects could affect human resource management (HRM) practices within an organization. HRM is usually associated with managing people within an organization (Herold et al., 2008, but HR professionals need to reexamine their practices and change accordingly to suit to the changing needs and challenges (Ulrich et al., 2009). They need to ensure the organization is flexible to change (Mello, 2006). What is more, Pryor et al. (2008) stressed that currently leaders are confronting changes that are exceptional in terms of speed and the complexity of the changes required, and lack the time necessary to address the changes and the expectations for performance results. Also, they added that leaders must simultaneously think and make decisions about future changes, some of which will be long term and some immediate.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation for Future Research

The research arena for change management in the UAE is extraordinarily diverse and lively. The author's intention was not to provide a coherent framework to guide future research, only to stimulate interest in selected topics for scholars, academics, and researchers. Currently, many governments are ready to try out new things so long as there is minimal or no risk at all involved. However, there is a need to take risks, and to be ready to fail. Fundamentally, failure is positive because it offers an opportunity to learn, and leads the way towards other innovative ideas. Innovators ought to have a "protected space" for experimenting and not be afraid of failing as they seek the next step in government innovation. In this regard, the government of the UAE will have to take further risks in order to realize the desired changes in the nation.

At present, the UAE is viewed as having among the most innovative and outstanding government practices in the world. Apparently, the UAE is regarded as being one of the principal investing governments in the adaption and implementation of smart initiatives in its private and public sectors. The nation has taken some measures to facilitate change management by, for instance, setting up Smart Government. However, there are some research gaps that exist in the literature, which could form the basis for future research on change management in the UAE. For instance, what has been suggested by both Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) needs to be looked at and studied in the UAE context. Moreover, the available literature does not discuss specific problems encountered by the government, or by the private sector, in its effort to implement new technologies; furthermore, it does not consider citizens' evaluations of the efficiency of current and existing government services. Moreover, most of the literature mentioned about change management in the UAE is based on data collected from small samples, and there is need to use a larger sample to obtain findings that clearly represent the entire population. The suggestions in this paper are only a guide for future research and are not meant to provide a coherent framework, but it is also hoped that the paper will stimulate interest in selected topics.

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