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International Business Communications

international cultures within business
Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

Sharing of ideas, thoughts, information, etc. is an important part of human interaction. It is therefore apparent that communication is one of the most important skills that humans need. Communication is part of life and exists in many forms. It can be verbal, non-verbal, visual, written type of communication. Communication in the business world is very crucial for all the stakeholders involved (Quintanilla & Wahl, 2018). Running a business involves various activities, decisions, choices, instructions, etc, and these need to be communicated across organisation for smooth operations. Business communication has evolved as markets have crossed international boundaries and dealings are made internationally. People from various parts of the world are now required to work for the same company owners and managers. Language and cultural differences have been bypassed by communication as organisations are setting up offices in different countries and employing local workers. The globalisation of the business world has led to the existence of International Business Communications. This element of business has emerged as one of the most important tools that allow organisations to run smoothly and operate across the world. Businesses have realised that International Business Communication is vital to growth and efficiency of the venture and thus this field is now given a lot of importance. To set up business in a new country such as Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to consider the factors that may impact communication and thus the overall functioning of business in the country. The culture, beliefs, language, ethics, values, etc. of Saudi Arabia are very different from the United Kingdom and this may impact the communication among teams working in the two countries. To ensure that the business objectives are met successfully, it is crucial to create communication channels that are effective and uniform. This is also important to maintain harmony throughout the organisation and to achieve holistic success and growth.

About the selected country - Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a developing country located in western Asia. The country is extremely rich in resources such as oil and has made a lot of strides in the past few decades in terms of development of infrastructure. The country is a fine example of a mix of modern era development and history and culture. While at one hand, Saudi Arabia has one of the largest airports in the world, the use of camels for transportation of goods is still done in parts of the country (Sullivan, 2017). Some of the neighbouring countries that share their international border with Saudi Arabia are Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the UAE and

Yemen. The country also has the largest sand desert called the Rub' Al Khali as well as the world's largest oasis known as the Al-Ahsa.

In the recent years, Saudi Arabia has created a name for itself in the field of international business and is considered to be a preferred location for entrepreneurship and setting up pf business branches. The country offers ease of doing business and benefits to outsiders who wish to set up business in Saudi Arabia. It offers a wide range of business investment opportunities in various sectors such as in mining, metals, manufacturing, chemicals, real estate, tourism, etc.

The country is a monarchy and Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud is the king of Saudi Arabia. The royal family in Saudi Arabia is the richest royal family in the world. the country is an Islamic nation and its constitution is the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah. The country is considered to have conservative beliefs and has certain rules and regulations that are to be strictly followed by its citizens and visitors. Saudi Arabia is the largest producer and exporter oil in the world but has also worked on developing other modes of economic development in the past few years. Many cities have been developed for industrial production and manufacturing and there are now 35 cities with over 9000 factories in Saudi Arabia. The country has made changes to its policies over the last few years to aid economic development and to attract foreign investments. The tallest building in the world is currently under construction in Saudi Arabia and it will be one kilometre high and be called the Jeddah Tower (Al-Kodmany, 2018).

Theories Of International and Intercultural Communication

Despite all the benefits and welcome offered by the country and its infrastructural development, there are many factors that still need to be considered when our company moves its production to Saudi Arabia. One major factor is communication which is the key to handling the people and operations across the production plant. To be able to communicate the goals and objectives of the business to its people, it is important that there are appropriate mediums and channels in place. Since international business involves people coming from various cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds, it is essential to analyse and understand the dynamics that it entails. There are many theories of international and intercultural communication that can shed more light on the subject.

Hofstede Cultural Dimensions Theory/Model

Hofstede's model can aid in creating better cross-cultural communication in an organisation (Rahimi, et al., 2017). The parameters used by the model are power distance, individualism,

masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence. This information can be used to plan business strategy based on culture of local people making it extremely effective. For instance, in Saudi Arabia the locals have the main say in business culture. Most offices work from Monday to Thursday and there is limit to working hours per week. During the fasting month of Ramadan, the working hours are reduced to a maximum of 30 hours per week. In the UK, the working days and hours are a lot different and so are the manners of eating, speaking and holding business meetings. There are certain rules of dress code, greetings, eating, food, and some etiquettes that have to be considered by expats or foreigners when doing business in Saudi Arabia (Dominique, 2020).

Hofstede's comparison between UK and Saudi Arabia

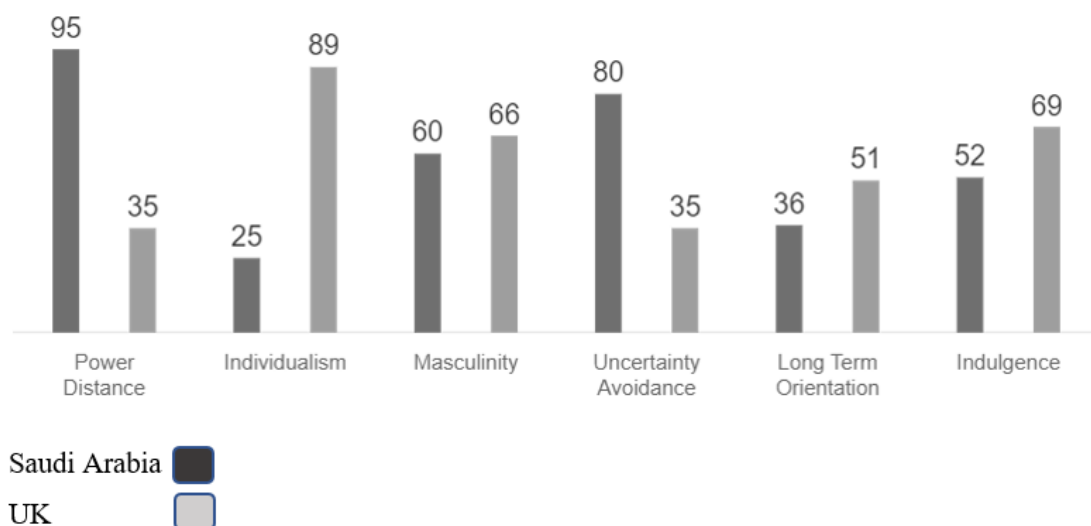


Figure 1: Adapted from (hofstede-insights, 2022)

As per the comparison, Power distance is the depiction of value attached to individual's status in society which is clearly more in Saudi Arabia (hofstede-insights, 2022). Then comes individualism and refers to the importance given to self-image in a culture or society. The culture in Saudi Arabia is more group oriented and there is less stress on individualism. Masculinity in Saudi Arabia refers to the attitude or general traits such as competitiveness, success, victory etc. Uncertainty Avoidance is about dealing with the ideas of future and what it may hold. The culture in Saudi Arabia has a little focus on discussing or planning to deal about the future issues and thus the Uncertainty Avoidance is high. The Long-term Orientation is less in Saudi Arabia as communities are traditional and there is strong attachment to the past.

Indulgence is about the society's way of dealing with the children or younger generation or indulging in their whims, desires. The score is at a cusp for Saudi Arabia and does not indicate a clear way of life in this regard.

Cultural Sensitivity

The term cultural sensitivity refers to the awareness or understanding of the difference in culture of other people, nations, regions, etc (Schühly, 2021). The knowledge of cultural values of other countries and people, etc. can enable better realisation and thus can result in harmony and mutual respect.

When setting up a unit in Saudi Arabia, it is imperative to be sensitive about the many cultural differences that exist between the nation and the UK. For a business based in the United Kingdom, setting up a production plant in Saudi Arabia would involve hiring local people, dealing with local authorities, abiding by local rules, regulations etc. A lack of cultural sensitivity can create challenges and have a negative impact on business prospects.

There are many small and big considerations that have to be made for doing business in Saudi Arabia (Kumar, et al., 2019). For instance, senior people are to be respected as they have the most power and decision-making rights in business.

Another important aspect is punctuality, as being on time or being early is considered a mark of respect. Beverages such as tea and coffee are part of business meetings. A little bit of small talk is the norm before the serious matters are discussed. There are many practical considerations as weekends in Saudi Arabia falls on Friday and Saturday and work days are Monday to Thursday. The people are warm, friendly and do not like to be rushed into decision making. At the same time, it is important to respect the religious beliefs of the people and they also do not like political discussions. Women may not shake hands in meetings and should never be forced to do so. It is very important at all times to behave with utmost respect with the local people and also abide by their rules. Dabbing is also not allowed in Saudi Arabia (Zafra, 2018). There are certain taboos like showing the sole of one's shoe is considered extremely disrespectful.

Communication Barriers Experienced by Foreign Businesses

The communication barriers that may exist in a country for people coming from other nations are primarily due to differences in language, cultural and social values and beliefs (Khosrow-Pour, 2019). Since communication can be written, verbal or non-verbal, it is impacted by many

factors. For business deals and negotiations, communication is imperative and therefore it is also important to identify challenges that may come in the way of effective communication in international business. The cultural diversity in Saudi Arabia is a challenge when it comes to setting up a uniform code of communication in business. It is therefore important to identify the areas that need to be considered when dealing in business with this nation and its people. The communication barriers can arise due to differences in perceptions, language, culture, habits, lifestyle, behaviours, etc. This implies the existence of verbal and non-verbal communication barriers.

Some common barriers that people from outside of Saudi Arabia may face during their communication are language related (Khan & Khan, 2020). While a large number of people in the country speak English, they have different accents and speaking style. At the same time, the huge number of migrant workers and skilled workforce may not have the same level of English-speaking skills as a person from the United Kingdom.

Another barrier is related to non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language or gestures. People in Saudi Arabia tend to use their face expressions, hand and neck movements to communicate. For instance, tilting head with a smile denotes a yes while leaning the head back and raised eyebrows means a no. It can be a challenge for someone to perceive these gestures if they are not from the country.

Making proper eye contact and not staring at the same time, showing respect and interest to the native speaker may be an issue for English managers and is something that needs to be practised. Maintaining a respectable tone of voice is crucial. At times, Arab people tend to raise their voices but that doesn't necessarily mean a disagreement, although it may send out wrong signals.

Understanding the social hierarchy can also be a challenge in communication. The culture is different for women in Saudi Arabia as compared to the UK and this has to be considered carefully.

Communication Strategies/ Recommendations

For a company that is planning to start a business in the Saudi Arabia, it is important to ensure clarity about the cultural and social differences that exist between the Arab nation and the United Kingdom. It is advisable to be prepared beforehand by analysing these differences (Khosrow-Pour, 2019). It is also recommended to create a strategy or plan that can enable smooth communication with the native people and the expats residing in Saudi Arabia. Since

communication is a key element of successful business strategy, it has to be designed as per the requirements of the country and its cultural diversity,

The strategy for communication should be based on various facets such as diplomacy, social and cultural awareness, religious and political scenarios, demography, etc. at the same time, the company should be clear about its own operational strategy in Saudi Arabia. A pre-planned strategy can be a great facilitator for business organisation. the company should be clear about the number of people it wishes to hire, the various skills it is looking for in the workers, working hours needed to meet targets, etc. The Human resource department has a key role in this building up of communication strategy.

While the international business communication strategy is representative of the values and ethics of the parent company in UK, it should also be in sync with the host nations cultural and social diversity, which in this case is Saudi Arabia.

Considering the fact that there will be a lot of communication required to run the production from Saudi Arabia, knowing the local language, cultural and religious beliefs, ideas and habits is also very crucial. Cultural sensitivity will be very crucial to understand the local people and the workers and will also help avoid communication barriers (Quintanilla & Wahl, 2018). It is important to know the working times, weekend layouts, public holidays, religious festivals, habits, preferences of the people in Saudi Arabia. The understanding of the life of a worker living in the country may also help shape the strategy and ensure that there are no cultural chases or conflicts due to misunderstandings. Maintain a professional and respectful relation with the local people, agencies, authorities will be beneficial for the company and should be worked on diligently.

Language cues, slangs, body language, verbal and non-verbal communication etiquettes should be understood in advance.

It is advisable to consult local communication and culture experts to ensure that there are there is clarity about the acceptable behaviours and communication styles. This would also help in getting clarity in designing communication strategy.

Understanding the cultural difference and awareness about local lifestyle should definitely be the first step as it will help achieve cultural sensitivity. This is vital to cross culture businesses to flourish and work towards the desired outcomes.

Conclusion

Communication is without doubt a key component of international business strategy and can never be ignored. It allows companies to operate from other countries and is crucial to global expansion and growth of business beyond international borders. Understanding the cultures, beliefs, habits, thoughts, lifestyles of other people can make it easier for businesses to be set up in nations that are diverse and have different cultures. Saudi Arabia is an Arab country and is extremely different from the United Kingdom in a number of ways.

The culture of the country is important to its people and is something that reflects in their business style, work habits and behaviours. It is therefore apparent that for a British company to set up its offices in Saudi Arabia, it is important to respect and accept those beliefs and cultural differences. Mutual respect can be beneficial for the people working on both sides and will enable the organisation to meet its business objectives successfully. It is therefore obvious that there is a need for an effective communication strategy to be put in place that allows people from UK to manage operations in Saudi Arabia. The strategy should aim to bridge the communication, cultural and social gaps between the people, and enable them to work on the same page and share ideas, information and instructions without hassles.

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