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Islamic challenges to HR in modern organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – This research is designed to answer questions: do Islamic teachings offer relevant perspectives on human resource (HR) issues? Are the treatments of HR issues in Islam compatible with evolving organizational concepts? Do current HR practices in countries with Muslim majority (CMM) resemble Islamic prescriptions? It aims to address these and other questions in line with early Islamic instructions.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper surveys Islamic texts and treaties. It then compares Islamic instruction to what prevails in Christianity and Judaism.

Findings – Islamic prescriptions view the interests of employees and employers as complementary. Workers are treated as the creators of value in the marketplace and by necessity the primary force for economic growth and prosperity. It is argued that the application of the philosophy of *ehsan* in the workplace offers a useful framework for positively safeguarding societal concerns.

Practical implications – This paper offers practitioners and researchers various avenues on how to address the issues of HR in Islamic societies. In contrasting Islamic and Western HR foundations, the paper identifies certain minefields.

Originality/value – This paper offers a unique insight on the nature of HR instruction and policies. In this paper, it is argued that Islamic prescriptions on HR, if internalized, may guard against violating human dignity and ensure a fine balance between organizational and societal interests.

Keywords Human resource management, Islam, Management techniques, Employees, Ethics, Persian Gulf States

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Since the industrial revolution, economic reality has become the dominant factor, which shapes human resource (HR) policies and practices. The scarcity or abundance of skilled resources along with the nature of market structure and competition has highlighted the necessity for competing effectively in the marketplace. The issue of organizational survival and growth has been closely linked to effective HR management. Indeed, the interweaving of HR policies with organizational strategic posture has been reinforced as market competition is intensified at national and global levels. While this trend is apparent in the Western world, the spread of capitalism and the subsequent integration of developing countries into the global capitalist system have challenged traditional organizational concepts and practices in these countries.

Among developing nations, Muslim countries have faced the challenge of adaptation to Western management practices while observing and maintaining



religious prescriptions and norms. In particular, the challenge has been exemplified in terms of HR practices. In the Western world, scientific management practices set the foundations for a work sphere where boundaries are clearly defined with articulated tasks and rules. Until very recently, work has generally been separated from the spiritual sphere. This is not the case in many countries with Muslim majority (CMM) where, according to religious instruction, spiritual guidelines are the foundations for personal and organizational conduct. Since the majority of CMM societies have adopted the capitalism system, a conflict between economic reality and religious instructions is expected.

This paper is designed to address HR issues in the context of Islamic prescriptions as delineated in the *Quran* and the teachings of the Prophet Mohamed and early Muslim philosophers. The application by and implications for modern organizations are specified and possible contradictions are highlighted. While the focus of the paper is on Islam, a reference to two other monotheistic religions – Christianity and Judaism – is made. This is because the three religions share a common root and the commercial interaction among their respective communities has intensified in recent decades making it imperative to highlight their business prescriptions. The paper addresses, too, whether or not Islamic HR norms are relevant to modern organizations. Most importantly, the paper challenges researchers and practitioners to rethink their existing perceptions of HR and offers insights necessary for safeguarding human dignity without compromising the concerns of organizations and societies. The paper surveys HR practices in some CMM and examines them in terms of Islamic prescriptions. Along with the introduction and conclusion, the paper is divided into three main sections: centrality of work in Islamic thinking, human resource issues, and HR challenges.

Islamic logic and work

Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islam, since its inception, has placed clear and considerable emphasis on work. Work is viewed as a necessary means for achieving equilibrium in life. That is, Islam treats work as an obligatory activity and a virtue in light of the needs of human beings and the necessity to establish equilibrium in one's individual and social life (Ali, 1988; Nasr, 1984). In fact, hard work is equated to spiritual fulfillment and is seen as a duty for able individuals (Ahmad, 1976). Seeking to earn one's living in a lawful manner is considered a religious observance. The Prophet Mohamed stated: "No one eats better food than that which he eats out of his work" (cited in Muhammad Ali, 1977, p. 293) and "Whoever goes to bed exhausted because of hard work, he has thereby caused his sins to be absolved" (cited in Abdul-Rauf, 1984, p. 10).

By giving work a religious, social, and economic dimension, Islam has elevated labor, and those who engage in economic activities, to a noble position. Therefore, it gives individuals a reason and the motive to actively pursue economic activities and to participate in endeavors necessary for enhancing their welfare and that of the society. Indeed, the spiritual and practical aspects of work are founded on a philosophical foundation calls *ehsan* – goodness and generosity in interaction and conduct, be it at a personal or at the organizational level. *Ehsan* is a commonly held philosophy, which closely shapes individual and group interaction within organizations. In personal and organizational conduct, *ehsan* is both an outlook and a broad concept, collective and

relational in nature that encompasses goodness, mercy, justice, forgiveness, tolerance, and attentiveness. These aspects are well articulated in the Prophet Mohamed's saying: "*Al-Din Al-maamala*," (Religion is found in the way of dealing with other people). The underpinning of *ehsan* is that everything in the universe derives its legitimacy from facilitating the interaction and growth of human beings. The latter sets the stage for understanding the nature of labor relations and interaction at work.

Labor issues are an integral part of human relations and, by necessity, manifestations of prevailing cultural and societal norms. In Muslim countries, cultural values and beliefs have been profoundly shaped by Islamic teachings and principles. Due to the presence of strong traditions and a commonality in uttering Quranic verses and the Prophet's sayings in public, individuals have developed, since early childhood, an awareness of and sensitivity to what is socially and religiously sanctioned. In the workplace, therefore, *ehsan* is taken for granted and efforts are made not to give the impression that its pillars are intentionally and consciously violated.

The elements of *ehsan* whether they are taken individually or collectively underscore three significant qualities which place Islamic perspectives on labor relations apart from that of Christianity's and Judaism's views. These are: relationship and interaction are primarily personal; inclusive; span class and race considerations; and are expected to be flexible and broader in their application. In terms of the first, the *Quran* (49:13) states:

The noblest of you in the sight of God is the best of you in conduct.

The Prophet underscored this when he defined obligation in terms of relationship to others and as a responsibility to:

[...] feed (the poor) and offer salutation to whom thou knowest and whom thou dost not know.

Human considerations, therefore, at the workplace, take priority on matters related to treatment of employees, justice, and equality in hiring and promotion.

The second aspect is related to inclusiveness and equal treatment of all, regardless of their backgrounds. The *Quran* (49:13) explains:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other.

And the Prophet in his last sermon reminded people:

[...] an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action.

The fourth Caliph, Imam Ali, (656-661), stated the essence of equality when he wrote: "They [People] are either brothers in religion or equals in creation," and that they "have equal rights irrespective of where they reside." These prescriptions are normative and their application at the workplace may vary considerably. Nevertheless, their observation would make the application of diversity easier, and work relationships would be governed by fair access to power and authority.

One of the most important aspects of *ehsan*, however, is generosity at work. In this context, *ehsan* takes on the meaning of *sedakah*; commonly referred to as charity but signifying any sincere or beneficial deed. The term is a derivative of *sedak* (truth) or

righteousness. As in Judaism, in the general context of *sedakah*, both employer and employee are assumed that they will treat each other with kindness, sincerity, and responsibility beyond what is specified in the contract and the boundaries of work. This means that either party, but mostly those who are in charge, should go beyond the letter of the religious law in their generosity and in providing assistance to employees. While both Islam and Judaism place considerable emphasis on *sedaka*, in Islam it has two forms-obligatory and voluntary. The two forms of *sedakah* are specified in the *Quran* (9:60):

Charity is only for the poor and the needy, the collectors appointed for its collection, those whose hearts incline to truth, the ransoming of a captive, and those in debt, and for the way of God and for the wayfarer.

In regards to the monetary one, only able people are expected to engage in it.

The broader meaning of *sedakah* was articulated by the Prophet Mohamed, who, when asked about it provided the following clarification (see Muhammad Ali, 1977, pp. 209-11):

- It is obligatory: “*Sedakah* is incumbent on every Muslim.”
- It can be monetary or non-monetary: for he who has anything to give “He should work with his hands and benefit himself and give *sedakah*.” But if he cannot find any work, then “He should help the distressed one who is in need.” In the case that he is not able to find such a situation, then “He should do good deeds and refrain from doing evil-this is *sedakah* on his part.”
- It is morally binding and broad in its application: “Every good deed is *sedakah*” and “A removal of that which is harmful from the road is *sedakah*.”

While *sedakah* can be a form of obligatory legal duty, collected by a government official, this is not the domain of this paper. It is the morally binding form that is applicable for HR management. Without overlooking the fact that one’s commitment to the moral form of *sedakah* is a matter of personal choice and that people differ in their inclinations and behavior, this form, in a broader application, has wide range implications for HR practices and organizational activities. Doing good deeds in the performance of duties, lifting the spirits of co-workers, and avoiding any harmful act either toward the organization or fellow workers represents broader guidelines which, if observed, could transform organizational culture into a strong one and considerably ease understanding between management and employees, thereby setting the stage for a productive and safe workplace.

HR issues

Like other developing nations, CMM societies have experienced profound economic, technological, and political changes and, with no exception, these countries have espoused, in varying degrees, the capitalistic system. Likewise, at the sociocultural level, these countries have exhibited collectivistic orientations. These values change much slower than business ideology - economic, political, and technological (Ralston, 2008). Generally, in developing countries sociocultural and business ideology influences may be in conflict with one another resulting in the development of new and unique value systems among individuals (Ralston, 2008). The author labeled this perspective crossvergence. This perspective postulates that as countries espouse a

form of capitalism, depending on their specific experiences, business related values will change more rapidly than core social values and a contradiction between sociocultural orientations and business related ideology takes place.

In the remainder of this paper, issues of recruiting, selection, compensation, performance evaluation, and training and development are addressed (see Table I). Although these issues are covered from a normative or prescriptive aspect, a reference is made to prevailing HR practices. The objective is to demonstrate whether or not HR practices correspond to Islamic instructions. Previous research has documented that in CMM societies, various HRM models have evolved (see Ahmed, 2006; Aycan, 2006; Chew, 2005; Rowley and Abdul-Rahman, 2007). These models reflect the distinct historical contexts within which they have developed (Budhwar and Mellahi, 2006) and appear to confirm the crossvergence perspective. Furthermore, even in countries like Malaysia, which have purposely attempted to reinvigorate Islamic approach in business and government, conduct, many employees are not sure about Islamic HRM (Hashim, 2009) while Western HRM practices are widely adopted in varying degrees (Chew, 2005). The diversity and plethora of HR models makes it difficult to thoroughly and adequately investigate them in light of Islamic prescriptions and condoned actions. Therefore, in tackling HR issues in a more concise and a workable way, a reference to the practice of HR management in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is made. The GCC include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These countries are selected for six primary reasons. First, all of them rely primarily on expatriate workers; the share of expatriates in the workforce ranges from about 60 percent in Saudi Arabia to over 90 percent in UAE. Second, multinational companies (MNCs) have played a pivotal role in the economic development of the GCC. Therefore, these States have been exposed to modern HR management. Third, these countries publicly project themselves as being guided by

HR issue	Organizational prescriptions
Recruitment	Organizations should identify and attract qualified personnel, there should be a recruitment pool from which vacant jobs are filled, and diversity is a virtue
Selection	Should be based on competency, experience, shouldering responsibility, organizational fit, and reputation within the community
Compensation	Must be based on contractual agreement, differ according to expertise and situation, determined in advance, and wages must be given immediately once work is completed, can be either cash or/and in kind, should be increased according to circumstances, and sufficient to provide a decent living
Rewards	Must be linked to performance and behavior, reinforce the good deeds, ethically driven, can be either monetary or non-monetary or both, and should not generate ill feelings among subordinates
Training and development	A morally anchored and performance based evaluation, aims at allowing employees to consider their performance in line of their contribution to their organization and society, individuals are endowed with varying capacities to learn and develop, knowledge and experiences are essential for individual growth and utilization of potential

Table I.
Human resources issues
and their organizational
meanings

Islamic teachings in their conduct and transactions. Fourth, in the public sector, and to a degree in the private sector, citizens, relative to expatriate employees, are compensated generously. In Kuwait, for example, the average monthly pay for citizens in the public sector is around \$3,740 but for expatriate workers it ranges from \$150 to \$261 (*Khaleej Times*, 2008). Fifth, the GCC have a similar business related ideology and all have adopted a comparable form of capitalism (see Ali, 2008). Finally, the media inside and outside these countries provides a fair coverage of labor issues.

At the outset, however, it is necessary to point out two issues: labor theory of value and labor contract. Unlike Judaism, which does not have labor theory of value (Van Burns, 1999, p. 337) or Christianity, which initially did not address it, Islamic thinkers developed their own theory of labor. Building on Islamic instructions, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), the medieval Arab sociologist, argued:

[...] civilization and its well-being, as well as business prosperity, depends on productivity and people's efforts in all aspects for their own interest and profit. When people no longer do business in order to make a living, and when they cease all gainful activity, the business of civilization slumps and everything decays (Ibn Khaldun, 1989, p. 238).

He asserted that labor is the source of value, stating:

One of the greatest injustices and one, which contributes most to the destruction of civilization, is the unjustified imposition of tasks and the use of the subjects for forced labor. This is so because labour belongs to the things that constitute capital. Gain and sustenance represent the value realized from labour among civilized people. By their efforts and all their labours they (acquire) capital and (make a) profit (Ibn Khaldun, 1989, p. 241).

The above quotation demonstrates how early Islamic thinking situated workers at the center of economic activities and acknowledged that without them there would be no value or wealth creation, and the prosperity of the society would be jeopardized. The quotation, too, highlights the issue of labor contract in its emphasis that workers must not be forced to carry out duties against their wishes. The contract, however, does not need to be detailed. That is, the contract may be brief and often it does not cover all elements of entitlements and obligations. Nevertheless, Islam makes it obligatory that economic relationships and market engagement are written down so that neither party's rights or duties are overlooked and promises are fulfilled without serious misunderstandings or disagreements. The *Quran* instructs (2:282):

To write (your contract) for a future period, whether it be small or big, it is more just in the sight of God, more suitable as evidence, and more convenient to avoid doubts among yourself. But if it be a transaction, which ye carry out on the spot among yourselves, there is no blame on you if you reduce it not to writing. But have witnesses whenever ye make a commercial contract and let neither scribe nor witness suffer harm.

In contractual matters, which are done spontaneously, witnesses may be sufficient. Nevertheless, *Quran* instructs that, in either case, the parties involved must act on their promises. The *Quran* (2:177) orders the faithful, "Fulfill the contracts which ye have made."

The requirements for labor contracts and the expectations of both the employees and employers, though generally governed by *ehsan*, are outlined in different treaties and commentaries. Nevertheless, there are three preconditions for any labor contract to be valid. These are: the legal contracting age, consent, and contract subject (type of

work) must not violate Islamic law (e.g. gambling, producing alcohol, etc.). The obligations of the employer (see Asaf, 1987) include clarifying and advance agreement on the wage and pay schedule, showing goodness to and treating workers with dignity, enabling workers to perform their task without undue burden, and providing adequate instruction. Many organizations in the Muslim world, especially in the public sector, are officially obliged to meet such guidelines. In the private sector, there is widespread deviation. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the *Arab News* reported that some Indians workers claimed that just after their arrival in the Kingdom their employer forced them, under threat, to sign new contracts that stipulated lower salaries and performance of manual work (See Rasooldeen, 2008). Similarly, the Human Rights Watch reported both in 2003 and 2008 that abuses of workers, especially domestic workers, were common in the GCC. In 2003, it stated:

Intimidated by violence or the threat of it, workers are often afraid to demand unpaid wages, protest poor conditions, or seek legal recourse for abuse.

In 2008, it reported that a court in Saudi Arabia “dropped charges against a Saudi employer who abused Nour Miyati, an Indonesian domestic worker, ignoring both the employer’s confession and compelling physical evidence.” During current economic downturns, abuses of workers in the GCC increased and in the construction sector, many were not flown back to their home countries at the expense of their sponsors as was stipulated in their contracts (Al-Shaibany, 2009).

The employees’ obligations toward their employers (see Asaf, 1987) are: commitment and loyalty to the company, perfection of work, sincerity, obedience, and giving advice to superiors and co-workers. These obligations are normative in nature and are found in other societies, be they governed by Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, etc. What makes a difference in a society with a Muslim majority is that the concept of *ehsan* constitutes a foundation for action and behavior.

Many of the aforementioned aspects are addressed in the following coverage of major elements of HR management. These elements are addressed with specific emphasis on the normative or religious prescriptions and their practice or relevancy to today’s organizations.

Recruitment

The process of identifying and attracting qualified personnel in early Islamic teaching was not articulated in detail. Rather, like any general function at the time, it was addressed in a broad framework where freedom of discretion and exercising of judgment were enhanced. The Prophet Mohamed’s statement, “We do not or shall not employ a person who desires to be so appointed” served as a guideline for HR practice under his administration. It implies that people should be recruited not just because they asked for a job but rather there should be a recruitment pool from which vacant jobs are filled. More importantly, the recruitment, during his administration, was marked by diversity.

In modern organizations, recruitment is highly complex. In Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that there are certain jobs which are reserved for a specific group, by birth right, (e.g. all governors of the 13 administrative regions must be princes-from the al Saudi clan;- senior jobs at most business firms are reserved for family members) there is a law which regulates recruitment. For example, the Labor Law of 2005, Article 25

mandates that firms must send to the competent labor office: a statement of vacancies and new jobs, a notice of steps taken to employ nationals, a list of names, jobs, professions, wages, nationalities of workers, numbers and dates of work permits for non-citizens, and a report on the status, conditions, and nature of work.

The Law specifies, too, that firms must have prior approval and a valid license before engaging in recruiting. This applies both to the recruitment of citizens and of foreign personnel. Furthermore, the Law outlines requirements for recruiting nationals and the steps, which must be taken to obtain work permits for non-citizens. In terms of recruitment, both government agencies and private firms utilize various means, including advertising in media – newspapers and television –, employment agencies, recruitment agencies, colleges, word of mouth, Internet, and referrals. Employment agencies specialize in finding jobs primarily for citizens. On the other hand, recruitment agencies specialize in recruiting workers from abroad. In recent years, online recruiting has become a favorite means of recruiting employees especially from abroad.

The rise of complex recruitment mechanisms, including the persistence of sponsorship programs for expatriates, reflects the dramatic increase of demand for foreign labor, where there are more than seven million expatriates, companies' persistent needs for skilled and less costly foreign labor, concerns for security, and the government's attempt to force companies to hire citizens as part of the Saudization of workforce initiative. These mechanisms, however, have induced frauds and corruption and have facilitated the abuse of workers. The *Arab News* (2008) quoted the head of the National Commission for Recruitment stating that the Kingdom is relaxing the enforcement of the new recruitment rules as some labor supply agents have resorted to swindling and forgery of documents related to recruiting. Previously, the same officers praised the new rules as a means to "eliminate the malpractices of the past and put an end to most problems, especially those of absconding housemaids and drivers" (Al Hakeem, 2008).

Selection

Islamic instruction and traditions set five conditions for selecting employees (competency, experience, shouldering responsibility, organizational fit, and reputation within the community) and order the faithful not to follow their desires. The *Quran* advises (28:26), "Truly, the best of people for thee to employ is one who is competent and trust worthy." Furthermore, the Prophet asserted that "[h]e who is in a leadership position and knowingly appoints a person who is not qualified to manage others, then he violates the command of God and His messenger," and "when a person assumes an authority over people and promotes one of them because of personal preferences, God will curse him forever." Similarly, the second Caliph Omer emphasized behavioral and moral aspects along with performance potential in selecting employees for jobs. He is reported to have said, "When a person is in charge of Muslim affairs and appointed for reasons of favoritism or kinship relationship [nepotism], then he cheats God, the Prophet, and the community" (quoted in Asaf, 1987, 346).

The fourth Caliph, Imam Ali, in a letter (hereafter the Al-Asthar document) to his governor of Egypt (Ali, 1989 p. 329), underscored the significance of the selection function and its importance to the welfare of the society. He stated that selection of employees "should not be based solely on your intuition . . . Rather, you should scrutinize their record of service with good rulers before you, and select those who have

left the best impression with the people and who have a reputation of honesty . . . Put in charge of each service a person who is not afraid to shoulder responsibility.” Imam Ali underscored the needs to go beyond experience and what candidates say about themselves. Specifically, he emphasized the importance of the interview in observing and evaluating how and what candidates say and react to certain questions. Such information has to be assessed in line with feedback received from members of the community regarding candidates’ moral standing and effectiveness. Imam Ali held those who are in charge, the governor in this case, fully responsible for bad selection arguing that “any fault of your employees which you overlook is your own responsibility.”

Organizational fit, also, is to be given priority in selection. Situational aspects and specific job requirements may dictate that priority is given to those who can meet a special challenge. For example, in selecting governors, the Prophet gave considerable attention to task requirements and job specifications. Most of his appointed governors were known for their determination and foresight and were mostly from influential clans. The reason underlying this is that, at that time, Arabian communities appreciated personnel who were known for their braveness, assertiveness, and noble social affiliations. In selecting market administrators, those who were appointed were known to be pious and kind to their fellowmen. Market administrators dealt with issues that demanded empathy and sensitivity to and identification with immediate daily problems. This situational aspect in selection influenced Muslim thinkers even during the era of decline. For example, Ibn Taimiya (1263-1328) argued that in selecting an employee, task requirements should be taken into consideration. In a situation where the primary job involves maintaining wealth or the treasury, then the appointed person must be trustworthy. In the case of generating and maintaining wealth, both competency and trustworthy attributes are prerequisites. This is applied, too, in case of war or national instability; a decisive rather than pious leader is recommended.

Much of the selection of personnel in modern organizations in Muslim societies does not nearly resemble what is outlined or sanctioned by the faith. Nevertheless, in selection and other related functions, there is a common phenomena calls “unity of contradictions” (Ali, 2008). This situation arises when managers repeatedly utter Islamic sayings which prohibit nepotism and sanction competency, however, in practice, a preference is given to those who are relatives or are recommended by friends irrespective of their qualifications (see Abdalla, 2006; Namazie and Tayeb, 2006). This inconsistency is conspicuous and is an integral part of organizational normalcy. In the GCC countries, the contradictions find a fertile ground. The selection is often an outcome of the interplay of several factors. These factors range from scarcity of qualified personnel, nepotism, bureaucracy, and political considerations, to rapid growth in the number of private and state enterprises, which have thrived since the early 1970s. The most important factors that render the selection process subjective and sometimes worthless are personalized relationships or personalism – kinship, regional favoritism – as well as the presence of a large number of guest workers and employees.

Compensation and reward

Unlike other issues in HR, compensation in the early days of Islam was, relatively, given special attention. While the subject of equality was important, the nature of work

and the family and task responsibilities were highlighted in wages differentiation. Compensation in the early years of the Muslim State was governed by specific guidelines:

- Employment is a contractual agreement. The fulfillment of such a contract is a moral and ethical obligation and involved parties must avoid any attempt to circumvent it. The *Quran* (7:85) instructs, “Nor withhold from the people the things that are their due.”
- Compensation differs according to expertise and situation. The *Quran* states (46:19), “And to all are ranked according to their deeds” and (39:9) “Say: ‘Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?’” Kurd Ali (1934) reported that the second Caliph, Omer, used to arrange wages for his subordinates and deputies according to hardship, living standard in a region, nature of task, and needs of subordinates (e.g. family size).
- Compensations must be determined in advance and wages must to be given immediately once work is completed. The Prophet Mohamed asserted that “if one hires an employee, he must inform him of his wage” and “the employee must get his wage promptly after the work is done” (quoted in Asaf, 1987, p. 362).
- Compensation can be either cash or/and in kind depending on the contract and mutual agreement.
- Wages should be increased according to circumstances. It was reported that the first Caliph, Abu Baker, followed equity principle, as the State resources were scarce. During the era of the second Caliph, Omer, the State expanded and resources increased. Therefore, he differentiated in compensations among senior members of his groups; those who were close to the Prophet and those were the first to espouse the faith were given more than others.
- Wages and compensation should be sufficient to provide a decent living. This point was clearly illustrated in the Al-Asthar document. It stated (Ali, 1989, p. 50), “Give them [subordinates] decent remuneration. That will give them the power to resist temptation and make them less susceptible to abuse what they are entrusted with.” It implies, too, a minimum wage.

In today’s practice, government and business organizations have adopted pay and compensation systems similar to what is found in Western countries. Most business companies use a mixture of base compensation, incentives, and benefits. In fact, it is common to have a base salary, cost of living allowances, special bonuses, and benefits in almost all business and government institutions. However, since most countries with Muslim majorities were once under colonial rules, primarily British or French, civil service laws influence the HR practice. In countries like Iraq, Algeria, Kuwait, Malaysia, etc. the colonial power, at the time, gave considerable attention to building government cadres and institutionalized a system that thought to optimize operation. The HR system, which emerged and later evolved, in terms of compensation, places a priority on seniority rather than performance and qualifications. Though most civil service laws incorporate elements of Islamic law, the application, in most cases, is limited. It is possible that equity issues and a just compensation system, which were highly cherished in the early years of the Muslim State, are often violated. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the *Arab News* (2008) reported that “After negotiations between the

NCR [National Commission for Recruitment] and authorities in various labor-supplying countries, salaries for housemaids have been fixed at SR500 per month for Nepalese, SR650 for Sri Lankans, SR750 for Vietnamese and SR800 for Indonesians and SR1,500 for Filipinos.” This difference in scale demonstrates that there is no minimum wage and that discrimination in wages for the same job does exist based on ethnicity or national origin. In fact, according to the Minister of Labor, a minimum wage is under consideration but only for Saudi nationals (*Saudi Gazette*, 2008).

In terms of rewards, in the early Islamic State, the practices differed according to circumstances, especially availability of resources. Two general philosophies governed rewards: egalitarian and elitist approaches. The first and the fourth Caliphs, Abu Baker and Ali respectively, followed the egalitarian approach. The second Caliph, Omer, however, witnessing a rapid expansion of the State and a sudden increase in resources, was an adamant adherent of the egalitarian philosophy, in terms of reward, he adopted an elitist approach and those who were pioneers in their faith, were given preference (See Glaachi, 2000; Kurd Ali, 1934). The dynastic States, which emerged after 661, without exception, showed a preference to the elitism principle. In recent years, both in public and private business enterprises, approaches to rewards have been similar to those, which exist in Western countries. Nevertheless, Islam sets the following guidelines for rewards (see Ali, 2005):

- The reward must be linked to performance and behavior. The *Quran* admonishes (27:90), “Can you expect any recompense other than what you deserve for your deeds?” and (37:131) “Thus indeed we reward those who do right.”
- The reward must reinforce the good deeds. The *Quran* states (6:160), “He that doeth good shall have ten times as much to his credit: He that doeth evil shall only be recompensed according to his evil.”
- The reward must be ethically driven. In administrative documents written during Caliph al Mamun’s time (813-33), reward was described “as an ethical obligation and as a philosophy and practice... Decent remuneration should be given as such that God made it easy for them [subordinates] to overcome their urgent material needs and strengthen them, thus they will be more obedient and loyal to you.”
- The reward can be either monetary or non-monetary or both. In the case of the non-monetary reward, the leader must show recognition and appreciation. Imam Ali elaborated on this matter, in the Al-Asthar document stating, (Ali, 1989, p. 319), “Show recognition of their [subordinate’s] good deeds. Repeat your appreciation of the achievements of those who do well. That will encourage the valorous and entice the reluctant.”
- The reward should not generate ill feelings among subordinates. That is, it should be based on objective measures and is given to those who deserve it. Imam Ali made this point when he stated (Ali, 1989, p. 319), “Give each of them [subordinates] the appreciation he deserves . . . Do not overestimate one’s deeds on account of his position or ancestry or underestimate one’s deeds on similar grounds.”

As in the case of compensation, reward in Islam underscores the importance of performance and seeks to achieve three objectives: enforcing good behavior and

avoidance of apathy, ensuring commitment and loyalty to broader societal goals, and encouraging employees to do their best, while observing spiritual norms.

Performance evaluation

Performance assessment has been given extensive attention and is clarified in the *Quran*, the Prophet's sayings, and that of his immediate four successors. The first two provide the normative standard, while the last translates the normative into workable guidance. The normative realm is revealed in Quranic instructions, and it is possible to group them into three categories: contractual arrangement, self-responsibility and control, and the Almighty's assessment of performance. In terms of contractual aspects, Islam views the employment of a person as a reaffirmation of an obligatory relationship between the organization and the employee. That is, the company and the employees have expectations that must simultaneously be fully met. The *Quran* (17:34) instructs Muslims that any promise or engagement is a contract that must be met by participants: "And fulfill engagement [promise], for the engagement will be enquired into." Indeed, the *Quran* presents the fulfillment of obligations as a command, (5:1), "Fulfill all obligations."

Under self-responsibility, the *Quran* clarifies that what one does is solely his/her responsibility and no one should be held responsible for the mistakes of others. While the normative responsibility is clearly specified, (74:38) "Every soul will be held in pledge for its deeds," the *Quran* articulates that individuals are aware of their deeds and are, therefore, capable of initiating corrections, (75:14) "Nay, man is a witness against himself." Morally, employees have a duty to monitor their performance. Since both contractual arrangement and self-assessment are verified in the hereafter, faithful employees and employers should observe their obligation and entitlement. The *Quran* seems to be specific, (11:112) "For He seeth well all that ye do" and (16:91) "Indeed you have made God your surety; for God knowth all that you do." Therefore, the normative aspects make the assessment of performance first and foremost a responsibility of the employee. This responsibility is transcended to the hereafter, when a person is presented with a record of his/her performance in the world, (17:14) "sufficient is thy soul this day [of Judgment] to make out an account against thee" and (2:234) "God is well acquainted with what ye do."

In line with the normative standard, the Prophet's immediate four successors outlined, depending on conditions, how the performance evaluation should be carried out. The second Caliph, Omer, used three approaches to monitor performance: directly reviewing public complaints and asking subordinates for accountability, sending monitors to assess the performance of public officers, and giving assessment and feedback to governors and subordinates during the session of pilgrimage. In the Al-Asthar document, the fourth Caliph specified that evaluation of subordinates must be strictly based on deed and behavior toward the public. There were direct and indirect approaches. The direct approach was practiced by the Caliph himself in regards to those who were working around him or those who were asked to bring their records with them to be evaluated. The second was practiced by sending monitors to far regions to evaluate governors and other employees. The document (Ali, 1989, p. 325) states:

Monitor their [subordinates] performance and use for this purpose people who are known for their truthfulness and loyalty. Your discreet monitoring of their work will ensure that they

remain honest and considerate to their subjects. Beware of your close assistants. If you have reliable information from your agents that one of them has committed treachery, then that should be sufficient evidence to impose punishment.

In both the normative and the workable guidelines, Islamic perspectives appear to set a framework for a morally anchored and performance based evaluation. More importantly, it appears that such a framework aims at allowing employees to consider their performance in light of their contribution to their organization and society. It is in this context that employees may have the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and improve their involvement. It is not clear from today's practices in CMM whether or not organizations or governments follow Islamic perspectives on performance evaluation. What is certain, however, is that in almost all countries and in medium to large-sized organizations one form or another of performance evaluation is used. The literature, however, reveals that performance evaluation lacks seriousness and objectivity (see Abdalla, 2006; Ahmed, 2006; Aycan, 2006; Namazie and Tayeb).

Training and development

In Islamic thinking, both the theoretical and practical dimensions of training and development fit within the broad concept of human existence and the capability of a human being to make a difference, assume responsibility, and provide value to society. According to the Quranic teachings, a person does not exist independent of the group or society, and a person is endowed with the faculties to shoulder responsibility and evolve according to circumstances and prevailing conditions. Without overlooking these conditions, the *Quran* states (13:11): "God does not change the condition of people unless they change what is in their heart." Although the Prophet acknowledged that people are different in their capacities and abilities to process information, stating, "They shall be burdened only with what they can bear"; he asserted that learning leads to development:

Knowledge is obtained through studying. The dialectic relationship among the learned individuals, knowledge, and work is captured in the Prophet's saying, "Learned people, knowledge, and work are blessed. When those who have knowledge do not act upon it, they are not blessed; but work and knowledge are always blessed".

Notwithstanding Islam's explicit acknowledgment that differences in capabilities exist, unlike Judaism and Christianity, it does not place limitations on the development and capacity to do "good" in life and work. According to both Judaism and Christian theology, human beings are inherently inclined to engage in evil activities and most likely this constrains their ability to perfect things or to do their best. Berkovits (1964, p. 187) made this clear when he accentuated the importance of evil desire and asserted that it is a "necessary ingredient of life itself." Rabbi Harold Kushner (2001, p. 55) agreed: "God has planted in each of us something called the *yetzer ha-ra*," or "the evil impulse." That is, the evil impulse is essential for the existence of human beings because any attempt to "amputate the part of a person that leads him or her to be selfish and aggressive . . . would be a disaster. What we'd be left with would be less than a whole human being."

Similarly, Christianity strongly believes that the human "capacity for evil is not only a fact, but a shocking fact" (Lowery, 1998, p. 2). Although the belief is that a person is created in the "image of God," the propensity to evil is strong and perhaps

though it is not ultimately the stronger, is by far the more clamorous. According to Lowery (1998, p. 3): “the evil tendency is like a mighty king who lays siege to a city, says the Talmud, and the good inclination is like a meek man inside the besieged city”. More importantly, the Christian tradition “affirms that the perfection of human beings is unattainable in history and that it is sinful to even try to attain it” (Hanson, 1999). Indeed, Hanson suggests that in the Christian tradition a human being has his /her limits and “is unaware of the limits of . . . possibilities.” In Christianity, and in the Protestant perspective in particular, therefore, “all aspects of human existence,” to a certain degree, are defective. Consequently, any treatment or technique to improve human abilities and motivate people “must be approached with suspicion” (Hanson, 1999, p. 127).

In Islam, mankind is situated between two extreme possibilities: perfection (God’s spirit) and lowliness (clay). Therefore, according to Islamic teaching, human beings have infinite choices to make in life. Shariati (1979, p. 92) argues that a human being is in an “infinite direction,” either toward clay or toward God. There are endless possibilities and, depending on the psychological level of existence, individuals make their own choices. Therefore, a person is “compelled to be always in motion. His own self is the stage for a battle between two forces that results in a continuous evolution toward perfection.” Consequently, attaining perfection in Islam is a virtue. Islam recognizes that people have different desires and have under their disposal various means to achieve their goals. The *Quran* instructs (92:4), “Verily, (the ends) ye strive for are diverse” and (53:39) “Man can have only what he strives for.”

In terms of the practical dimension of training and development, early Islamic teaching highlighted two aspects: probationary appointment and apprenticeship. The second Caliph, Omer, is reported to have said to one of his subordinates, “I appointed you to test you. If you do well, I will promote you; but if you do not, then I will dismiss you” (quoted in Ali, 2005). Similarly, the fourth Caliph, Imam Ali wrote, “Monitor the behavior of your assistants and use them only after probation.” In the latter stage of the Islamic stage, and especially during the Abbasid era (749-1258), the state bureaucracy was well established. Thus, there was a heavy reliance on professionally trained individuals, which in turn evolved into a professional class that carried into families from generation to generation (e.g. al-Khadi, judge; al-Jabi, collector of tax; al-Khazin, warehouse director; Al-Katib, scribe). In the business sector, however, apprenticeship was the norm. Perhaps the flourishing of apprenticeship and the growth in the economy, during the first six centuries of Islam, was what gave rise to flourishing industries and an associated professional class (al-Saag, jeweler; alwaraq, producer of book notes; al-najar, carpenter, etc.).

In addition to probationary appointment and apprenticeship, in the early era of the Islamic state, seminars were conducted and pre-job oral instructions were provided. In today’s business, whether in government or private sector, organizations espouse various forms of training and development and spend considerable amounts of resources on such activities. In fact, the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia and UAE, have attracted consultants from all over the world and major training corporations have established offices in these countries. In many Muslim countries, large companies have their own training centers. Likewise, both on and off job training are pursued. Senior level managers and those who need special skills are sent to outside institutes to acquire knowledge and expertise. Onsite training is mostly reserved for operational

and technical aspects. This type of training is either carried out by an internal staff or by contracted professional consultants and experts. The latter are drawn from foreign firms, mostly American and British.

Facing HR challenges

Leat and El-Kot (2007), among others, have indicated that, in the Middle East, HR policies are influenced to a greater degree by Western management. While rules and policies are designed with a Western framework in mind, the practices are still culture specific (Al-Hamadi *et al.*, 2007; Mellahi, 2003). This particular situation raises two issues in terms of HR practices in Muslim countries. The first revolves around the cultural specificity of management theories and subsequently that of HR. Most Muslim countries, especially the GCC States, have been economically linked to the centers of global capitalism (USA, Britain, etc.) and are integrated into the world economy. Many of these countries are left teetering between global capitalism and the dictates of their own cultural traditions. The second issue, centers on the degree of religious influence on the practice of HR. Islam does not separate between the sacred and secular spheres of life. This makes it obligatory for the faithful to behave ethically and observe Islamic instructions in their business dealings and management. However, those who live and work in Muslim countries are aware that many religious guidelines are not seriously observed in the way that tribal, economic, or political considerations are given priorities (see Hamadi *et al.*, 2007).

The fact remains, however, that the Quranic text and the sayings of the Prophet are an ever-present entity. They are cited on a regular basis and are continuously read, studied, and promoted. It is possible that the intensity of their citation and pronouncement has created a situation where a deviation from the written word is not consciously processed and when faced with contrary evidence, those who deviate in practice do not see a problem. The latter may validate and give credibility to an ever presence of “unity of contradictions.” This particular phenomenon is culturally peculiar and it may shed light not only on the personality of Muslims (intense religious identity pride and simultaneous self condemnation for not following religion) but also on the practice of HR management where the interplay of tribal, political, religious, colonial legacy and economic factors takes place. This interplay, combined with what Ali (1995) called cultural discontinuity, makes it possible for many Muslims to treat foreign elements and practices as their own. The inconsistency between business ideology and cultural values can be viewed in the context of crossvergence perspectives. In their adoption of capitalism, CMM societies have experienced rapid changes in business, technological, and political spheres. However, a shift in their sociocultural core will take years if not decades to take shape. Thus, the appearance gap between HR practices and Islamic prescriptions is part of a values evolution resulting from integration in the world economy and the subsequent, albeit slow, adoption of individualistic values inherent in the capitalism system.

While the above situation is a matter for concern, Islam offers useful prescriptions for HR practitioners. Indeed, as was shown in the previous sections, while Islamic normative guidelines for selection and compensation, for example, were envisioned more than 1,400 years ago, their message and content are in line with contemporary and probably futuristic thinking. Nevertheless, Islamic prescriptions for HR, especially with their emphasis on human dignity, kindness in dealings, and concern for the

welfare of the society, may not fare well with secular Western HR policies and practices. Most HR policies are based on American individualism and the Protestant-capitalism. Under both philosophies, the pillars of *ehsan* have no place. Employees, and especially workers, are viewed solely in terms of their economic contribution to the firm. Furthermore, Islamic views of HR focus on communal relationships and the concerns of the community. That is, the firm has a specific role to play in the society, well beyond its economic role. Though Islam underscores individual rights and dignity, these are regarded within the context of the community and its interests.

Most importantly, in its emphasis on morality in conduct, Islam expects both employers' and employees' obligations must be grounded in ethics. While Protestant-capitalism appears to empower employers in hiring and firing, these are highly restrained in Islamic teachings. In fact, the concept of morally responsible business conduct, including HR, constitutes a powerful force that guards against abuses and prejudices at the workplace (Ali, 2005) and, in essence, places moral limitations on the employer's rights to dismiss employees and the treatment of employees in the workplace. Indeed, the philosophy of *ehsan* at the workplace emphasizes that there are no inconsistencies between business and moral obligations, making it obligatory for HR policies to be built on transparency, accountability, justice, and sincerity. That is, the prosperity of workers and employers is interwoven. Ibn Khaldun (1989, p. 273) argued that: "Affluence comes to those who work and produce these things by their labour." Centuries later, Protestantism, and subsequently capitalism, reaffirms the same. The difference, among others, is that *ehsan* is the foundation upon which prosperity is sustained. As Ibn Khaldun (1989, p. 239) asserted, the growth of any enterprise is contingent on justice stating that:

The only way to property is through cultivation. The only way to cultivation is through justice. Justice is a balance set up among mankind.

Three primary challenges stand out. The first is for HR is to treat the interests of labor as complementary to that of employers and vice versa. In contemporary business, the application of this proposition, be it in Western or Muslim countries, is a far reaching possibility. Economic pressures and the urge to maximize profits and accumulate wealth by any means, make it difficult to apply Islamic HR prescriptions on a wider scale even in Muslim countries. In the latter, however, the adoption of Western HR policies, while asserting the claim of observing Islamic prescriptions, may seriously impede sound economic and social development.

The second challenge revolves around the term *sedakah* and the duties of faithful business people to go beyond the letter of the law and what is specified in the contract in helping employees and elevating their suffering or preventing any potential harm to them. In Muslim societies, where various forms of capitalism are adopted, to go beyond what is agreed on may not sound like good business practice, leaving those who believe in *sedakah* in a dilemma.

Lastly, as a spiritual guiding principle, *ehsan* asserts justice, abhors exploitation, and underscores the importance of social relations and priorities in conduct (e.g. employer has to give due consideration to firings or layoffs beyond economic calculations). In an economic system where competition pressures and profit

maximization dictate how labor relations should be managed, the application of *ehsan* is impossible. Even when senior managers believe in *ehsan*, they might find it necessary to overlook the prescriptions of *ehsan* in the short term. However, once this becomes a habit, it might be difficult to reverse.

Conclusion

Islamic perspectives on HR underscore the role of labor in achieving economic growth and prosperity and offer useful guidelines for ensuring cooperative labor relationship at the workplace. These perspectives, though written more than 1,400 years ago, are still vibrant and alive in the mind of the believers. In this paper, the Islamic philosophical logic, *ehsan*, is debated and its implications for HR policies are addressed. Furthermore, the major elements of HR management in Islamic teaching are outlined.

It is argued that Islamic HR prescriptions are relevant to today's business organizations. Since the emphasis in Islam is on optimally serving human beings and the validity of any act is judged in terms of its benefit to society, Islamic HR policies can be a factor, which enhances the survival and growth of organizations. Throughout this paper two points were made clear. First, in most Muslim countries there is a commitment to Islamic teaching. Nevertheless, the applications of HR often deviate from Islamic prescriptions. Secondly, though in most CMM modern organizations appear to follow HR policies, which might appear Western on paper, their practice is shaped by various factors including tribal, religious, colonial legacy, and political norms. Therefore, these organizations have to rethink their priorities and design policies, which serve their interests in the long-term.

Finally, the paper briefly highlighted the inherent contradictions between Western HR management and Islamic instructions. It was argued that the latter elevates communal concerns over individual and characteristically links the interest of the organization to that of the society. That is, for morally guided HR policies, Islamic teaching is a vital and rich source for designing HR policies, which optimally serve the broader interest of the society and enhance the contribution of organizations to the general welfare of the society.

It is important to acknowledge that the analysis has its limitations. Specifying boundaries of religious instructions in terms of business practices is not only an impossible task but may lead to curtailing the individual's best judgment and impeding spirited debate and action. Furthermore, the paper's content represents the author's existing familiarity and knowledge of the normative instructions. There are many prescriptions which might be overlooked or where the mandate of the addressed ones is not adequately clarified. One possibility, in order to evade this shortcoming, is to have a cross-country survey of HR practices and norms to adequately address whether Islamic prescriptions are observed and their areas of deviation, relevance, practicality, and benefits are identified. This should be undertaken by a team of researchers from various countries. The team should address areas of relevancy and provide insight into why certain practices have evolved instead of others. Future research should focus on providing a framework for studying HR issues in an Islamic context and highlight the most appropriate issues, which are consistent with ideal forms and optimally serve the goals of organization and society.

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