

Chapter 11

Factors of Culture Affecting ICT Adoption in an Arab Society

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ABSTRACT

The world is witnessing vast and rapid developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which can affect all aspects of our daily lives. This chapter aims to investigate cultural factors that influence the Saudis adoption of ICT. A questionnaire was used to gain insight related to business language, communication language, culture and ICT R&D, support of the Saudi Arabia government of production development, consistency of Internet with local culture, openness of the culture of the country to foreign influence, the impact of employees' culture on their work, and the protection of Saudi culture.

INTRODUCTION

In line with Arab governments' efforts to overcome the digital divide barriers, the Saudi government has contracted foreign companies to develop new applications and web sites for various government departments and had spent about \$2270 million in 2002 on training staff. The government is also encouraging the private sector to participate in software development, in addition to being proactive in sponsoring and hosting ICT related conferences for the last few years (Al-Maliki 2005).

Saudi Arabia had Internet connection since 1994 when King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Centre (KFSHRC) established a satellite link to Bethesda, Maryland, via the International Medical and Educational Data link (IMED) (Shafi, 2002; Burkhart, 998), then, a US based company managed the Saudi connection and its Internet infrastructure, as well as hosting the official Saudi government website in the United States. In 1995, Saudi Arabia transferred to the GulfNet Academic network to connect academic institutions, research centres, hospitals and public libraries (Shafi, 2002).

In 1997, after lengthy debates, discussions and consultations within the Saudi authorities,

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the Government approved a resolution giving the coordination, introduction and management of initial Internet services to King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) (Shafi, 2002; Al-Furaih, 2002). This authorized KACST to provide Internet services to customers under certain conditions and controls in order to preserve the values and the Islamic traditions of the Saudi society,

By 1999, the Internet service was made available to the general public in 1999 through domestic services, with some regulations put in effect to restrict Internet use. One of the most important regulations of those was the introduction of censorship on the Internet contents on a national scale. The aim was to block access to websites which were deemed non-acceptable sites; those which conflict with the religious, cultural, legal and traditional values of the Saudi society (Shafi, 2002). At the early stages of introducing the Internet publicly, there were certain fears and anxiety within the Saudi society that this new medium will be misused to negatively influence their religious and cultural values and therefore, it was expected that the penetration rate of the Internet will be slow.

Several studies (Choucri et al, 2003; Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1991; Shore & Venkatachalam 1995; Dean et al, 1997; Palvia, 1998) have investigated the relationship between the 'national culture' and ICT. These studies have emphasized the importance of culture to the success of ICT adoption. Other researchers such as (Hasan & Ditsa, 1999; Tricker, 1988) conducted multinational surveys that resulted in identifying a relation between culture and effective use of ICT applications. Levitt (1983) predicted a global 'coming together', a convergence and eventual elimination of distinct cultures based upon improvements in communications and increases in global trade. Examination of the literature reveals that culture is an important factor to be considered in any e-assessment framework. In this chapter, the issues and questions that have been considered

to reflect on the impact of culture on ICT in the Saudi context were:

- What language used in daily business
- What language used in daily communications
- Does the culture support research and development
- Does the government supports the development of ICT culture in the country
- Is there consistency of Internet technology with organisation beliefs and business needs
- Is the nation's culture open to foreign influence
- What is the impact of an employee's culture on his/her work
- Can new technology assist in protecting a nation's culture

The author has also investigated the critical factors that impact local contents and cultures in developing countries, which can potentially impede or foster the adoption of ICTs. This study aims at analysing cultural issues and the use of ICT at Saudi organizations. At the end of chapter some recommendations are put forward related to the adoption and adaptation of ICT applications for organisations in the developing countries.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a survey as an instrument for collecting data in order understand and evaluate the impact of cultural factors on e-society in terms of ICT adoption and acceptance, which is considered as an important factor to determine the level of e-readiness of Saudi Arabia to adopt and cope with new technologies.

The study uses real data which was collected directly from public and private Saudi organizations rather than using already published data from international organizations e.g. the World

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